



Book Three
Lyceum Diplomacy
J. Z. Colby



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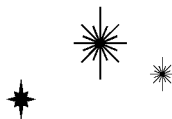
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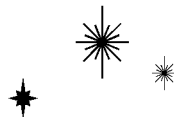
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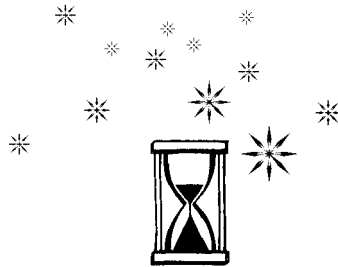


Lyceum Diplomacy

Book Three of J. Z. Colby's original Lyceum story

**by
J. Z. Colby**





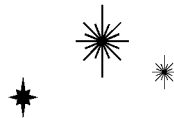
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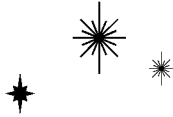
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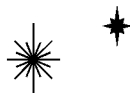


**For “Liberty”
who loved horses almost as much as boys.**

**For “Ashley”
whose landings were as light as a feather,
but who never found the training she wanted.**

**For “Shawn”
who was born in the wrong century,
and whose love for Sarah was never known.**

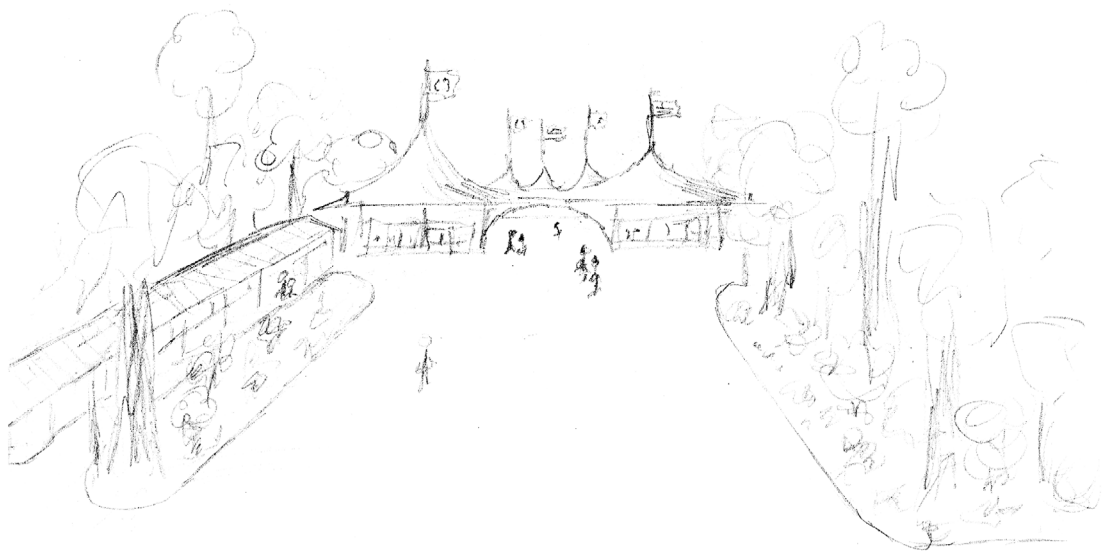
**For “Sarah”
who took refuge in her music
for as long as she could.**

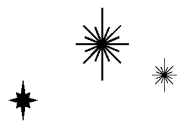




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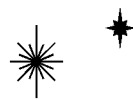
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“Sometimes, in international diplomacy, you gain a lot more by giving in than by being rigid . . .”

— Ashley



Chapter 1: One Final Performance

On New Year's Eve and the early hours of New Year's Day, the entire Lyceum campus (save for certain refuges such as the hermitage cabins and the Mortuary) was host to one huge party for all those persons and organizations who wanted to steer themselves and their children away from the mind-deadening drug use that was still so common among the general populace on that day of the year.

In addition to being purely an opportunity to serve the regional community of which it was a part, Lyceum had an ulterior motive. Many churches who would otherwise never have dreamed of crossing paths with each other were brought together for a few hours of food and drink, music and dancing, games and skits, movies and performances. Catholics discovered that Mormons were human after all, Baptists learned that Jehovah's Witnesses were as joyful as anyone else, and Jews found that Buddhists didn't live as far away as they had assumed.



Jenny and her mother sat together after serving themselves at the dinner buffet in Conference Center One. The ten-year-old was surprised that her mother only piled *one* plate high with food, but figured she was saving room for all the goodies available at the food pavilions in the Dining Hall. Jenny took just a spoonful of most things, as she too wanted to visit the specialty booths later. They ate in silence for a few minutes at a small table off to one side.

“So... they tell me... you’re doing some kind of... music,” Mrs. Clark said while masticating a mouthful of scalloped potatoes.

“Yeah — it has seven voices, and we’ve got almost four minutes of it synchronized!” Jenny said with excitement, responding to the first interest her only known parent had ever shown in her music.

“Hmm. Some kind of nursery rhyme, I suppose.”

“No, Brother Chad says it’s neo...” Jenny stopped, suddenly realizing that her mother wouldn’t believe or understand if Jenny told her its genre, and probably didn’t really want to be talking about her music at all. And so it was, the large lady was gazing toward the dessert table, and hadn’t even noticed that her daughter had stopped in mid-sentence.

Jenny had never wanted to be an embarrassment to her mother. She genuinely wished she could do something her mother would like. But she had no idea what that could be, unless it was to eat like her mother did, which Jenny knew she was completely incapable of doing. She twisted her face for a moment in a mental shrug and went back to picking at her plate.

A few minutes later Brian walked near, and he and Jenny smiled at each other. Mrs. Clark gave him a dirty look, and couldn’t imagine any good that could come of his association with her daughter.

Jenny summoned her courage and looked up at her mother. “Brian and I want to go to the Arena and see what kind of dance music they’re playing. Do you want to come with us?”

“You can’t dance!” her mother said in a hushed, indignant voice.

“Sure I can,” Jenny said with the confidence that came of knowing she didn’t have the time to put *anything* off. Whatever she was going to do, she was either going to do now, or never. “I did at the Halloween party and at Thanksgiving!”

Mrs. Clark was speechless for a moment. She tried to imagine her terminally-ill daughter dancing, but couldn’t. Eventually she gave up trying, and her shifty eyes began to wander back to the serving tables. “Um... you go ahead, I suppose. I think I’ll get another piece of cake and see if there’s a good movie playing somewhere.”

As her mother waddled toward the desserts, Jenny smiled at Brian, and he came over and kissed her on the cheek.

“My mom wants to eat cake and look for a funny movie,” Jenny said with a bit of a scowl, obviously not sharing her mother’s taste in films.

“I think there’s a comedy scheduled in Conference Center Two.”

“Want to go dancing?”

“Sure! After I get one of those mango smoothies Liberty is making.”

“If you share it with me, I’ll share a piece of Brenda’s grasshopper pie with you!”

“Okay!”

Brian pushed Jenny toward the Dining Hall, aware that this was her last New Year’s party, just as Christmas had been her last Christmas, and so on all the way back to her last birthday. He knew she had little chance of turning eleven, and knowing that made him want to cry, not just at that moment but each and every time he realized it. But crying would only make shorter and sadder the time he could spend with Jenny, and so he had not often given himself that luxury. He could cry, if he still needed to, when she was gone.



Shawn and Sarah were both on the information and assistance crew for the first part of that evening, helping visitors to find whatever food and drink, entertainment, or services they needed. Shawn had managed to stay in good spirits ever since Christmas morning, and had reassured all his friends that his depression had stemmed mostly from his relationship with his parents.

The Main Lobby had lively music playing, an arts and crafts show, and signs pointing to everything from Brother Wilhelm’s Bratwurst and Wiener Schnitzel Stand in the Dining Hall to Sister Joan’s lively Teenage Lounge in the Educational Center. When people came in, Sarah took special pains to make sure all the children knew there were things happening for them too. She steered them toward cartoons, skits, playrooms, craft projects, movies, games, or the Infant and Toddler room, depending on their ages and interests.

Shawn and Sarah kept in close touch all that evening with smiles and shared words when they were close together, short conversations or questions by pager when they had to be in different buildings. They were both very happy that they could help to bring so much New Year’s joy to so many people.



Liberty's blenders whirled almost constantly, turning out tasty drinks of a variety of different flavors, but she recommended the mango most highly when people were undecided. Jason's salad bar featured just about everything that anyone had ever put in a salad, from marinated artichoke hearts to fresh ocean shrimp, baby corn cobs to teriyaki chicken strips. Brenda's dessert table abounded with fruit turnovers and rich pies and cakes, and all around the Dining Hall other goodies were available for the asking: sushi by Brother Li, Mexican fare by Sister Tomasa and Brother Carlos, and gyros and baklava by Brother Demitri.

Jenny and Brian wandered through on their way to the Arena, and somewhat later Mrs. Clark shuffled in, determined to try one, possible two or three, of everything.



Tim followed Ashley from shift to shift that evening, helping her when he could, but much of his mind was on the very special love making he had planned once she was finally free at two in the morning. He had already purchased six fancy candles, a package of incense, three massage oils that promised sensuous delights, a disk of romantic music, a box of fancy chocolates, and a dozen red roses. He knew it would be their last night together on that trip, as he had to fly home the following day.

By midnight, when Ashley started her last two-hour shift in the Infant and Toddler room, he had set everything up in her room without her slightest suspicion.

Even though she knew nothing of his special preparations, Ashley was looking forward to their last night together as much as he was. She knew she would cry when he was gone, but she had also decided the delights he brought her were worth the tears. She just hoped that someday they would be together for good.

At midnight there were fireworks over the Main Plaza, and a hundred and fifty bottles of sparkling concord grape juice were broached, glasses were charged, and everyone, including the children who were still awake, toasted and raised cups to the passing of one year and the opening of another.



About an hour into the new year, parents began filtering into the room

where Ashley and two other members were watching over their mostly-sleeping infants and toddlers. The parents thanked the childcare crew profusely, left generous tips, and then headed off toward home or into the Lyceum Lodge.

Tim had enjoyed playing with the children, and seeing that made Ashley very glad, but his collection of playmates was rapidly dwindling as the last few either fell asleep or were picked up.

By 1:30 in the morning, about half their charges had left. Many of the parents had been laughing and talkative as they approached the room, but had switched to hushed voices as they entered out of respect for the sleeping children.

One certain voice was especially loud, and sounded familiar to Ashley as it approached, but somehow it was different than she had ever heard it before. As the voice entered the room, Ashley's suspicions that it belonged to her friend and team captain were confirmed, but the voice was slurred and very silly, verging on incoherent. Karen's two older friends who were visiting from her home town, and who entered directly behind her, didn't sound much different.

"Hi, Ash-esss! Wanna go ta da gymmm annn play? We gonna gooo have some funnn!"

Ashley caught a whiff of alcohol on Karen's breath. "Um... I'm still working for almost another hour, and then Tim and I want to spend some time together."

"Ooooookay. See ya!"

As they left, about a dozen red lights and bells were going off in Ashley's head. She knew that Karen shouldn't be walking around campus in that condition with a public event going on. She knew her fellow gymnast had just startled several of the children. She knelt by one of the cots to comfort one of those children, and the other members and Tim did the same with others.

Then Ashley realized the real danger. Karen was drunk, and was heading toward the gym.

"Sister Lydia, I'm worried about Karen."

"Do you think she'd do anything stupid?" the older lady asked.

"I don't know. I've never seen her like this. I don't know much about

drunk people. I'm really worried about her."

"Do you want to go and keep an eye on her? We can finish up here..."

"Could I please?"

"Go ahead. Remember, folks are in the office and at Security if you need help."

"Thanks. I hope by just tagging along, I can keep her from doing anything dumb."

"I'll come too," Tim said.

"Thank you for all the help with the children, Tim!" Sister Lydia called after them.



Ashley and Tim set a rapid pace for themselves as they headed along the hallways that would bring them to the Recreation Center. Groups of people were still having fun, sipping exotic beverages, savoring tasty desserts, or just laughing and talking. Most of the organized activities were winding down and the entertainers yawning as they packed their instruments or props to head home.

Ashley had hoped they would catch up with Karen and her friends before they reached the gym, but her team captain was already mounting the balance beam when she and Tim entered. Ashley stopped and watched, biting her lip with concern. It only took Karen a few seconds to fall off the beam, which luckily was surrounded by thick landing pads. Ashley ran over.

"Are you okay?"

Karen was laughing while picking herself up. "Suuuure I'm okay, Ash-esss. That was funnnn!"

"Karen, I don't think you should be doing tricks in the gym right now..."

"Nuthin to it! I'm fine, realllly!"

Karen's friends were still laughing about her fall from the beam. "Show us somethin' else, Karennn!"

Ashley was sure Karen hadn't warmed-up or even done a basic limbering. But she wasn't sure what she could do to stop her friend.

"Watch thisss!" Karen said, approaching the bars and swinging onto the low bar and then immediately up to the high bar.

"Karen, please don't!" Ashley said.

But the fourteen-year-old Chunichi Cup medallist seemed determined to put on a show for her friends. Ashley remembered Karen telling Tabitha and her to never show off for anyone. This almost seemed to be a different Karen, a side of her friend that Ashley had never seen before.

Karen began casting giant circles on the high bar. They were loose and sloppy, and she kept hitting the low bar with a foot or knee, but she didn't seem to be feeling it. Then, as her circles got bigger and bigger, even Karen seemed to become aware that she was out of control.

"Whoa... whoa...!"

And suddenly she let go. It wasn't a planned dismount. She was flying backwards over the low bar, arms and legs flopping. Ashley saw it in slow motion. And she heard Karen cry out desperately, realizing something was dangerously wrong, a long, wailing cry for help. And Ashley felt herself running to where Karen was going to land a fraction of a second later, hoping she could somehow get under her to break her fall, but the support poles of the bars were in her way. She saw Karen land on her back on nothing but a thin exercise mat, and she saw her friend's head bounce, then her pelvis, and then her shoulders and head again.

When Ashley, followed closely by Tim, reached Karen a heartbeat later, the team captain was lying still, but beginning to shudder and gasp for air that she seemed unable to find.

"Karen!" Ashley nearly screamed.

The hurt gymnast's eyelids only fluttered without conscious response.

"Tim! The computer terminal! Press F9 three times!"

Tim ran. Ashley looked at her friend. Her color was changing rapidly, becoming pale, and then bluish. She could see that Karen wasn't breathing, but the thought of helping her by the usual methods didn't seem right. So Ashley took her friend's limp hand and began to talk to her and to pray at the same time.

"Please, Karen, stay with me. Help is coming. Please, Father, be with Karen, give her strength. I'm right here, Karen. You're going to be okay. Angels are with us, and help is coming..."

Tim plopped down beside Ashley.

"The screen said the emergency was acknowledged, and asked me what

kind, so I picked *medical*.”

“Tim, hold her other hand. She’s not breathing. We’re right here, Karen. We’re not going to leave you. Please be strong and hold on...”

Karen’s friends, who had been stunned into embarrassed silence by what had happened, now gathered around.

“Karen are you okay?” one said in an almost hysterical tone.

The other one started shaking the injured girl. “Come on, Karen, you’re okay, aren’t you?”

Tim quickly responded. “She doesn’t need that!” he said, pushing Karen’s older friend away.

At that moment several people ran into the room. Ashley looked up and recognized one of the lady doctors.

“Ashley, what happened?”

“She was drunk, and started showing off, and flew off the high bar uncontrolled and landed on her head and back. I tried to stop her, but...”

“Don’t worry about that right now.”

The doctor and her assistants were around Karen now, and Tim and Ashley gave them the space they needed, but Ashley held onto one of Karen’s hands. The two older friends made themselves scarce, looking like they wanted to sneak out of the gym, but not quite finding the courage to do so.

The doctor quickly felt Karen’s neck and her ribs.

“Airway?” one of the assistants inquired, looking nervous.

“Tracheal. Thank you for not attempting artificial respiration, Ashley.”

Then she went to work opening an air passage at the bottom of Karen’s neck and inserted a plastic tube to hold it open. An assistant cleaned up the blood from the incision. The semi-conscious girl greedily sucked air in and out, her chest heaving for the first time in several minutes.

The lady doctor spoke to several others on her pager, but Ashley wasn’t paying attention. She was holding Karen’s hand and looking at her suffering face and praying silently to herself like she had never prayed before.

A minute later, more people started arriving, among them Brother Howard, who let himself be guided to the accident scene by another member to save time. He knelt beside Karen and the other medics gave him plenty of room. He began carefully and slowly examining his patient’s neck, then her

ribs as much as possible without moving her, and finally her pelvis. It seemed that no one else breathed while he worked. Finally he spoke.

“Severe cervical torsion, cracked pelvic ilium, and...” he paused, checking again just to be sure, “... a broken third lumbar vertebra, possibly the fourth also.”

Ashley could sense by the tone of his voice that the first two things weren't that terrible, but the last one was. Tabitha arrived, and Ashley, her own face still covered with both dried and fresh tears, described what had happened with a shaking voice. The doctors listened even as they continued examining Karen, just in case Ashley's story contained anything else they needed to know. More medical people and equipment arrived, and they began preparations for moving Karen.

Several drugs were injected into the injured girl, and she began to relax and breath easier. The medics continued to take great pains preparing to move their patient, making sure everything was just right. The mat was cut with a laser so that it was just large enough, and then a rigid board was carefully slid underneath. Pads were tucked around her so she couldn't roll, blankets layered over, and straps snugged gently to keep her from moving. Ashley was amazed when someone said that it was already 2:30 in the morning.

With complete coordination, a team of six lifted their precious cargo and prepared to exit the gym. Suddenly Ashley had the terrible realization that Karen might never again enter the gym... at least as a gymnast.

Ashley, Tim, Tabitha, Brother Faellan, and Sister Shannon followed the medical team. They were all nearly in a state of shock. About the worst thing that could happen in their sport, had just happened. And it had happened to their friend and team captain.

Ashley especially was feeling terrible. She could have stopped Karen, and she hadn't. As the medical team and the followers approached the Heliport, she vowed to herself that she was never, ever again going to hesitate when her heart told her that something needed to be done, or stopped from being done. And for the rest of her life, she kept that promise that she had made to herself, even though it did not always bring her the greatest possible number of friends.

A helicopter and control room crew had already been assembled, and several of the seats had been removed from the bird that sat on the covered landing pad. The huge machine's engines started as they approached. Karen was carefully slid inside, and her doctors and friends filled the remaining seats. With a completely solemn atmosphere both inside and outside the helicopter, the dome overhead retracted, and the rotor engaged. The helicopter lifted itself into the clear, cold night and made a bee line for Portland General Hospital.



As soon as the rotor blades came to a stop and the door was opened, the unconscious girl was whisked into the warmth of the massive hospital. As they followed after the gurney, Ashley could hear the Lyceum doctors talking in rapid but hushed tones with the specialists who were going to treat Karen. The entire group was led directly to a conference room, two more doctors and several nurses joined them, and Ashley was asked to describe again in complete detail what she had seen when Karen had landed.

Even as Ashley spoke, x-ray images started to appear on the large screen in front of them. Ashley finished by describing how her friend shook and started turning blue soon after landing. The doctors quickly made their plans, using technical terms Ashley and the other young people didn't understand, speaking of 'longitudinal traction' and 'vertebral reconstruction.' Then the specialists quickly left the room to prepare for surgery, leaving the Lyceum members with nothing to do but wait. It was nearly four o'clock in the morning.



For the next two hours they did little. Brother Howard explained in terms everyone could understand what damage Karen had probably done to herself, and what the doctors were going to attempt to accomplish. But there was only so much he could say. Eventually they all fell silent again and just waited.

At half past six a nurse came in and said that the surgery was going as well as could be expected, and that it would last another two or three hours. The gloomy group finally wandered to the hospital's cafeteria and purchased some breakfast items. They poked at their plates half-heartedly, no one having many words to say.

Back in the conference room, they looked at magazines, or scribbled thoughts on note pads provided by the nurses, or just dozed, their lack of sleep beginning to make itself known. Ashley and Tim quietly held hands and gazed disinterestedly at a magazine about cars and trucks, or played tic tac toe without any enthusiasm.



It was nearly nine o'clock when one of the doctors entered the room where the Lyceum members were waiting.

"She's being taken to recovery now. We had to reconstruct one vertebra and part of another. Some bone fragments had to be removed from surrounding tissues. There was considerable nerve damage, but her spinal cord was not severed. She is out of danger, but we have no idea if she will ever walk again."

They went to the recovery room to see their friend. She was unconscious and would be kept that way for many hours. They took turns speaking soft words to their teammate, touching her hands, and kissing her brow. No one spoke any words about fault or about getting what she deserved, or anything about punishment or not doing gymnastics anymore. They all knew that no mere mortal could have devised any greater punishment than the natural consequences of Karen's attempt to show off for her friends on the gymnastics apparatus while drunk.

Sister Shannon made plans to stay with her student in the recovery room, at least until Karen's parents, who were already en route, arrived from Maine. Lyceum had used its considerable clout with all major airlines to get them immediate seats. The rest of the group decided to return to the campus, but vowed to be back as soon as Karen was awake.

The helicopter had long before returned to Lyceum to make room on the hospital's landing pad, and so a van was sent to collect the members. Their responsibilities for the day had already been assigned to others. It was assumed that Karen's friends would need time for reflection and healing even when they weren't at the hospital visiting. That assumption was correct.



Ashley and Tim wandered silently through the Residential Lobby toward Rivendell Hall, not holding hands, but just sort of leaning on each other as

they plodded along. Nearing Ashley's apartment, Tim had already resigned himself to the fact that anything romantic was out of the question, given their exhaustion and sadness, and he wished he could remove the things he had so carefully arranged in her room before she saw them. But that wasn't possible.

After opening the door, the first thing Ashley saw was the vase of red roses. She looked at Tim, and he smiled shyly and shrugged. Sniffing them, touching them, she felt so special, so lucky, so loved, that tears almost came to her eyes. Then she spied the large box of assorted fine chocolates, and smiled, remembering their first sweet night together.

Ashley continued wandering around her room, discovering that things had been tidied up that she had left a mess in all the activity of the day before. She found the scented massage oils by the bed, the incense on the table in a brass holder, candles ready to light, snacks on a plate and bottles of juice in a bucket of ice, most of which had melted. There was even a new disk in her quadraphonic player. She became aware of all the love, effort, and expense that had gone into everything she saw, and suddenly felt a wave of warm feelings for the freckled, red-headed boy who now stood just inside the door, looking at her with his sparkling but sleepy eyes. She went to him, put her arms around his slender but strong body, pressed her head against his shoulder, and started crying.

Some of her tears were for Karen, and some were for the shame she felt at being there when the accident had happened but not knowing how to prevent it. Although he could not shed tears as easily, Tim felt along with her, remembering Karen gasping for breath, remembering Ashley begging her friend to hold on to life...

Ashley also cried because her last few hours with this special boy had been changed, stripped of their innocence, robbed of their fairytale wonder. She didn't feel bitter toward Karen because of it, but just... sad.

After some minutes, neither could keep their eyes open any longer. They silently wandered to the bed and curled up together, still in their clothes. Sleep took them instantly.



Chapter 2: An Important Collaboration

A couple of days after Karen's accident, Lyceum had finally cleaned up from its New Year's party, which was by most accounts a very successful event. Only the elite gymnastics team and several of Lyceum's medical personnel could have wished for less excitement.

Karen's parents had arrived long before the gymnast had regained consciousness. They were already a bit unhappy with Lyceum for having to share the Chunichi Cup prize money with the organization that had trained, sponsored, and provided for their daughter for the past three years. But they clearly remembered signing the agreements that made such a division necessary, so they had kept their displeasure to themselves.

But after seeing their daughter in the recovery room, attached to various monitors and intravenous medications, they began to seethe.

In addition to Karen's parents, doctors, and several nurses, also present when the patient awoke were Ashley, Tabitha, and their two coaches. She slowly opened her eyes, blinked them many times in order to focus, and looked at everyone in the room. Then she took in her own situation, and closed her eyes again to gather her thoughts.

Everyone waited. When she finally opened them again, she spoke with a slow, groggy voice.

"Hi... Mom. Hi, Dad. I don't know... exactly what happened, but... I know it was..." She paused and swallowed. She wanted to cry, but didn't feel the strength. "It was... my fault. I went to town with Jackie and Chris and... and

we got drunk.” Then she turned her head slightly, which was obviously painful, and looked at her coaches and fellow gymnasts. “I’m sorry. I’m so very, very sorry...”

Karen’s parents consulted with a lawyer the following day. After hearing the circumstances, making some phone calls, and noting that all of Karen’s medical, rehabilitation, and living expenses were covered by her Lyceum membership, the lawyer assured them that they already had the best possible circumstances. They returned to their daughter’s bedside, knowing they had some fences to mend.



Liberty was just emerging from the Rotary Wing Flight Simulator at four in the morning, feeling very comfortable with her progress in the INTERMEDIATE-6 program, which had given her practice dealing with complex air spaces and airport regulations. During that session she had taken off and landed at Washington National Airport, Logan International Airport in Boston, and Chicago O’Hare International Airport. She wanted to try John F. Kennedy International at her next session. If she could handle those, she knew PDX would be relatively easy.

She stood in the wide, empty corridor that led back toward the Lyceum Lodge, and an involuntary yawned escaped her. Then her mind turned to the baking projects she had lined up for that morning, many of which were destined to be consumed by the big scientific conference that was beginning that very day. She would be doing security alongside Shawn and the other lab tech, and Shawn had promised to let her help with some of the demos. She planned to hold him to that promise.

Then she became aware of a murmur of voices and the sound of many feet. It was a strange hour for a large group to be walking anywhere at Lyceum. They came into view as they made their way through the Lodge and continued on toward her... and the Heliport.



It had all started only fifteen minutes earlier. Brother Paul had been on duty in the office when Lyceum’s dedicated SatLink for United Nations business had sprung to life. That SatLink channel was used often, but seldom was the image of the Secretary General, hastily dressed and clutching a cup of

coffee, the first thing to be seen.

Codes were exchanged and verified, and even before Brother Paul knew anything about the situation, he sensed its urgent nature. Then he listened as the planet's highest official spoke, and he scanned the mission specifications that were simultaneously pouring onto his computer screen after being deciphered using a key known only to Lyceum. Soon the Secretary General had finished his introductory briefing and was requesting confirmation of mission readiness.

Brother Paul finished looking over the mission requirements, and then began to access lists of members who fit the necessary language, training, and location specs. He did the same with lists of equipment and supplies, and then with a few key presses was in verbal contact with the only airline that could deliver the needed people to the mission site in time.

A minute later an airliner that usually would have flown to its destination with only a handful of businessmen and tourists on board was booked to capacity, and was destined to have several Lyceum members seated in the lounge for the entire flight.

The Secretary General received his confirmation, and then Brother Paul pressed the keys that would awaken the twenty-three mission members and sufficient others to get them prepared, equipped, and transported to the airport.



The first group to reach Liberty consisted of the pilots and other Heliport people.

"Liberty, give us a hand," Sister Erica said without stopping as the group swept past. "Pre-flight mechanical and engine warm-up on Songbird, Pad Two."

Liberty knew how to do the things that had been requested of her, but had never done them in a real-life situation before. She saw another group approaching with duffel bags and equipment cases, and figured she had better get moving toward the Heliport. She ran to catch up with the pilots and ground technicians.

Without many words they all went directly to their tasks, some clearly dressed for flight, others dashing into the control room or onto the landing

pads. Liberty was glad she was in jeans and an old blouse as she strode onto Pad Two, grabbed a clipboard, and began checking the essential mechanical systems of the eight-seater.

Even as she worked, bags and cases were tossed inside and the mission people themselves, all wearing light blue overalls, began arriving. Satisfied with all systems, she hopped into the pilot's seat and began the engine start sequence. The twin jets roared to life, and she watched indicators until they were stabilized and the engines were purring to perfection. Then she turned around and glanced at the members who were busy strapping themselves in.

"Nancy! Are you on this mission? What's happening, anyway?"

Her mentor spoke without taking her eyes off the mission documents she was scanning. "Big civil uprising in Central America after the last election was declared invalid. Secretary thinks some strategically placed observers can keep everyone talking to each other." Someone handed the blond lady a carton of juice, and she tore it open and began pouring it down her throat. After draining it, she continued. "I agree with him. And I'm going to act as one of those observers. Wait a minute!" Sister Nancy said, looking at Liberty for the first time. "You don't have your wings yet!"

Liberty smiled. "Just warming her up. Here's your pilot now!"

Brother John Michael took Liberty's place and began checking all his instruments. "Thanks, Liberty. Everything looks good."

Liberty squeezed into the back of the helicopter amongst the duffel bags and crouched beside her mentor's seat. "You'll be back soon?"

"In about a week, the Secretary thinks, but don't be surprised if it takes two." Then she looked and saw the concern in Liberty's face. "I'll be okay, kid. Remember, I've been doing this kind of thing for many years. Don't let any horses step on you while I'm gone, okay?"

"Okay," Liberty said, forcing herself to smile.

The warning buzzer sounded that meant the rotor was about to be engaged. Liberty was feeling strange, but she didn't know why. She stood, embraced her mentor and possibly future step-mother, and then dashed off the helicopter, just before someone slid its door closed. The rotor started moving and the dome began to open as Liberty was walking to the safety of the utility room. But even as she arrived and saw one of the students in her

piloting class holding the door open for her, she felt the need to see her friend and mentor off, so she took hold of a grab handle and braved the hurricane-force rotor wash as the bird lifted itself into the misty early-morning air, followed closely by the larger helicopter on Pad One.

Liberty stood silently as most of the ground crew headed back to bed. She was proud that she had been able to help a little, but still felt strange about the whole thing.

After a few minutes, she realized she wasn't getting anything done by standing on an empty helicopter pad, and she still had a number of pies and cakes to bake, so she turned her feet in the direction of the Dining Hall. The only thing she knew for sure was that she would be very glad when Sister Nancy was back.



The annual conference of the International Consortium of Physical Scientists began that same morning at Lyceum. Actually, some of the participants had arrived the day before, especially media representatives, knowing that lodging and other amenities would be impossible to secure at the last minute.

It was the first time Lyceum had been selected as their conference site. They generally preferred more urban locations, in close proximity to an airport, but several factors had colluded to bring them to the foothills of the Cascades that year.

Lyceum was able to include in the conference package constant bus and helicopter service to both downtown Portland and the airport. The availability of helicopters had especially peaked the interest of the conference planners.

The conference was expected to include the announcement of several new discoveries or confirmations of earlier theoretical work that would bring Physics, after centuries of conflict, to within hand-holding distance with Religion, and Lyceum was particularly equipped to handle that paradigm shift, if anyone was.

And finally, Brother Carl was getting very old, and no one expected him to be attending many more conferences. He had quietly offered Lyceum as a conference site for ten or twelve years, but had never pushed the issue. But

now, as he neared the end of his life, scientists all over the world were reminding themselves of his solid reputation, his awesome contributions to physics and astronomy, his countless articles, books, and videos, and his fearless inclusion, whenever he spoke or wrote, of a sense of the wonder, the mystery, the beauty and grandeur that was to be found in all of physical creation. That year's conference, even though Brother Carl would not be one of the physicists presenting earth-shaking research results, seemed to belong to him more than to anyone else. And he did, after all, live and work at Lyceum.

So the helicopters brought the prominent scientists and their families, the buses brought the teachers and students, and the media and other interested parties made their way to Lyceum in cars or vans. All morning long they checked into their Lodge rooms, explored the campus on guided tours or by themselves, and filled the Dining Hall, Art Gallery, and Gift Shop.



The teams that Lyceum had assembled to assist the scientists in their presentations and demonstrations had been formed into trios, each team including one advanced lab technician, one general lab technician, and one security person. Brother Jeff was in his late twenties, and wasn't Shawn's favorite person in the world, but they could work well together. To Shawn's delight, Liberty was joining them in the security position, and would double as a control technician when needed. At the ten o'clock reception they were introduced to the three scientists with whom they would be working.

Dr. Ben Richardson, from England, was fifty something, with graying hair and a big grin. Shawn liked him immediately, but Liberty had never been fond of spare tires. The paper he would be presenting, which had already been accepted for publication, was not one of the most profound at the conference, but was expected to lay out some solid foundations for 'post-particle' physics.

Dr. Mari Tanaka, from Japan, was gracious but reserved. She was somewhat young for a prominent scientist, being not quite forty, and was not inclined to talk about her work, but Liberty had already heard that it was rumored to be some of the most important at the conference. And yet it was also well known that she had not yet sought publication.

Dr. Hasari Singh seemed constantly nervous. A slender brown man of about forty-five, he brought with him a little of the insecurity that India still felt, wanting to be accepted into international cultural and scientific circles, yet weighted down by persistent social problems and poverty. Both Shawn and Liberty liked him right away, and his work was said to be revolutionary in nature. He had been offered publication in his native country, but was still looking for a chance to get into a respected journal of international scope.



Lyceum had worked closely with the conference planners to craft a program that would be a tribute to Brother Carl from start to finish, while at the same time completing all of the necessary business of the conference. To that end, the opening presentation was a collage of video and audio clips by and of the famous scientist, who sat in the audience, welcoming speech notes in hand, blushing.

Finally his moment arrived, and he stepped to the podium on the floor of the Ecumenical Temple wearing a white suit, which showed his wrinkled but seemingly tanned complexion and his dark gray hair to advantage. Complete silence fell over the audience.

“Good morning. Welcome to Lyceum, which as you know, is my home. No, there will be no tours of my private apartment.”

Laughter rolled through the thousand or more people assembled.

“Lyceum was created, in large part, for moments like this. The resources and services of Lyceum are at your disposal to a degree that most of you have not yet imagined. We will, of course, hear the presentations of twelve different major research efforts during the next week and a half. But also we will be able to witness some actual demonstrations of the new realities that we... or, actually I should say *you*... are discovering, realities that I, as a young scientist about a hundred years ago...” He smiled as the laughter ran its course. “...that I could not have imagined in my wildest dreams.”

Brother Carl looked at his notes during a round of applause.

“And while we share these eleven days, which I believe is our longest conference to date, we will be pampered with the delicious but healthy cuisine that Lyceum offers, we will be able to use the most advanced multi-media presentation systems available this side of the Smithsonian, we will be

entertained and/or enlightened whenever we have free time, and we will be able to partake of recreational facilities, worship and reflection times and spaces, and anything else we could need from a massage to a horseback ride.”

He ended with a smile, and a loud applause again filled the room, for both Brother Carl and for the promised amenities of Lyceum.

The conference planners spoke on a number of logistics topics, and then the audience received a sampling of the instrumental, vocal, and dramatic entertainment that would enliven the conference.

After the morning Welcome Session, the scientists and their research assistants partook of a lunch banquet in Conference Center One, served by all twelve of the members on the lab tech/security teams. The remainder of the conference attendees were directed to Conference Center Two for an equally tasty buffet.

At the banquet, Brother Carl introduced his Lyceum colleagues Brother Sidney and Sister Sheena. Neither was as famous as Brother Carl, but they received a warm welcome from the assembled scientists and researchers.

The afternoon consisted of some free time for those conference attendees to get settled who had not yet had a chance, followed by a two-hour session in which each scientist briefly introduced their work, without giving away the interesting results. Both Shawn and Liberty noticed that Dr. Tanaka’s presentation did more to hide the nature of her research than to introduce it, but they shrugged and brushed it off as simply a function of their ignorance about current theoretical physics.

Then all of the Lyceum laboratories held an open house for everyone to get familiar with the facilities and equipment available for their demonstrations. It was a busy time for Jeff, Shawn, Liberty, and the three other teams, as all the scientists seemed to want to know every detail about the capabilities of each of Lyceum’s labs.

As evening approached, there was entertainment and tours of the campus, dinner featuring Pacific Northwest salmon prepared in a variety of different ways, open house in the Library, Museum, and Recreation Center, and more entertainment. Lyceum’s few guests at that time of year who were not attending the conference were amazed at the level of activity, and were able to partake of much of the entertainment and excitement, to their complete

delight.



The following day, Thursday, January 4th, the conference got down to business. Two of the twelve research papers were each allotted three hours of time for lecture and multi-media presentations, question and answer sessions, and seminars. The two that had been selected for that day were the foundational works by Dr. Richardson and another scientist, both of whom were known for their ability to complete, integrate, and otherwise clean-up after the scientists who did the more daring, ground-breaking work.

Although Liberty had to stay alert, Jeff and Shawn had little to do that day but help carry this or fetch that. During the second presentation, they were all in the control room of Conference Center Two where Liberty was manually controlling a particularly complex multi-media presentation.

“Shawn, hand me disks three and four, please.”

“Here you are.”

“Thanks. Toss me that pink marker, will you, Jeff?”

“Catch! Say, where’s Ashley these days? You guys are usually inseparable, but I haven’t seen her around, even in the evenings.”

“She landed another U.N. courier mission,” Liberty said while highlighting some items on her script. “This time to deepest, darkest Africa.”

“A French speaking country, I believe,” Shawn said.

“And then she’s going to visit her parents in South Dakota for a couple of days on the way back,” Liberty added, adjusting her audio levels.

“How come she keeps getting U.N. missions?” Jeff asked.

“Because she’s good at them,” Shawn said. “She had Level One Clearance when she first joined. Lib and I probably won’t get ours until next summer or later.”

“Born diplomat, huh?” Jeff speculated.

“I guess,” Liberty said. “And she’s in French 3, getting ready for French 4, while Shawn and me are just starting our languages.”

“That explains a lot of it. Hey, nice transition on the video!”

“You like my wash-to-background, sweep and fade? Works pretty well in a situation like this.”

“Well, Shawn, you and me had better go get those boxes of materials they

want to use in the break-out session, 'cause it's only ten minutes away."

"Right. See you later, Lib!"

"You guys take care!" she said, slipping another disk into one of her players and preparing for a radial cross-fade.



The following day Jeff and Shawn had to go to work in earnest. One of the papers being presented that day had no associated demo, but the lack was made up by the unusual length of the other presentation.

During the demo, old Brother Sidney ran the particle accelerator, while one of the technical teams prepared the target plates and adjusted the display parameters. The lead scientist of the project left the explanations to her research assistants. The other scientists were present in the lab, with the remainder of the conference attendees watching on large monitors from Conference Center One.

The presence of ultimatic matter was actually very easy to see, they explained. It merely required different assumptions about what to look for. It required paying attention to what was *not* being effected by the accelerator, instead of what *was* being effected. But the trick, they explained, was knowing *when* to pay attention, as the ultimatic had a temporal relationship with the 'normal' matter of the accelerator, but it was *not* a causal relationship.

"So what kind of relationship is it?" someone asked.

The scientist stood, a gray-haired lady of about sixty. "Right now, for lack of a better term, I'll just have to call it a *social* relationship."

There was plenty of laughter in the room, but the other scientists knew it was no laughing matter. They were all close enough to the same conclusions to realize that their colleague was being very serious.



The demonstrations continued on Friday. Jeff and Shawn were particularly involved in Dr. Richardson's demo that used the Faraday Box to demonstrate that the newly discovered forms of matter were not subject to either magnetic fields or gravity.

"They are just coursing through space, on their own path, on their own agenda, ignoring us mortals and our puny, insubstantial stars and planets. A

half century ago our predecessors were gaping in awe at the neutrino, which seemed to not be stopped at all by the mass of the Earth. But at least it was known to be radiating from the Sun. In other words, it was a part of the universe as we conceived it, albeit a strange part. Ultimatonic matter, or energy, or whatever it is, is a whole different ball game, coming from somewhere invisible, going to who knows where...”

Shawn was aware that those mysterious qualities were suspected about the newly discovered energy forms, but hearing it all described so succinctly, and seeing the demonstrations first hand, left him feeling very thoughtful. So thoughtful, in fact, that he almost forgot to shut down the five megagauss field in the Faraday Box. He swallowed hard, realizing that everything in the room made of ferrous metals would have been sent flying if that field had gotten free.



Saturday was devoted to the presentation of audio, video, holographic, and even a couple of live dramatic performances, all of which had been produced very recently and were on physics, astronomy, and religious topics related to the new discoveries. The scientists were all very glad that such time had been set aside, as they seldom had an opportunity to take in educational or entertainment materials unless they were actually involved in producing them.

Shawn was able to see all but one of them, but Liberty was kept busy in the control rooms, and had to content herself with the knowledge that Lyceum always insisted on receiving a copy, to add to its library, of anything presented on campus that was of general interest.

Sunday was a day of rest, and most of the scientists and researchers were seen at Lyceum’s weekly inspirational service in the morning, on the helicopters or buses during the day for excursions into Portland, and in the Recreation Center or one of Lyceum’s many lounges during the evening. The gardens even saw some visitors, as the usual winter precipitation, both solid and liquid, had decided to fall elsewhere that day.



On Monday and Tuesday, four more papers were presented, and the associated demos were conducted. More of the mysterious qualities of the

newly discovered forms of matter and energy were revealed, from evidence of temporal reverse-causality, to theories of spatial non-locality, to the possibility of a complete absence of entropy. It was all either amazing to Shawn or completely over his head. None of it was comfortable. And none of it fit with what he had learned before beginning his science classes at Lyceum.

On Wednesday both Dr. Tanaka and Dr. Singh were scheduled to present their research. Jeff, Shawn, and Liberty were listening from the back of the conference center. A sense of excitement was in the air because both scientists who were to speak that day were known to have conducted the most potentially ground-breaking research. A sense of mystery was added to the occasion because Dr. Tanaka had not yet revealed anything significant about her work.

But when the Japanese scientist took the platform, she wasted no time. She quickly explained that she had been studying the data that was being relayed from numerous space probes through the Deep Space Telemetry station in Japan, and had been able to chart the path of the stream of ultimatons that was known to be coursing through the solar system.

Suddenly Dr. Singh stood and glared at the lady scientist from his seat near the front row. He obviously wanted to interrupt, but was trying to hold himself back. Dr. Tanaka noticed, but kept on speaking. The scientist from India looked red-faced. A moment later he turned and stormed up the aisle, passing not far from Shawn and Liberty. They could see and feel his wrath, but had no idea what had provoked it. Many others had also seen and felt his emotions.

“Who pulled *his* chain?” Liberty whispered.

Shawn shrugged. Everyone else seemed to either have not noticed, or were not willing to take their attention from the speaker. Shawn knew something was wrong. “I’m going to follow and see if he’ll tell me what’s bothering him.”

“Good luck. I’ll keep my ears open here. Call if it’s a security issue.”

“I will,” he said, slipping away toward the exit door through which the scientist from India had gone.



As soon as Shawn was out the door, he began to run, as he knew the angry

man had a head start and had been striding in earnest. He could faintly see footprints on the damp pathway, and so quickly crossed the Amphitheater and headed for the Main Plaza, arriving just in time to see his charge disappearing into the Asian Garden.

Shawn continued to follow, but slowed to a brisk walk. He entered the garden, and soon came to forks in the path, but had a hunch he knew where to find Dr. Singh. Shawn took the fork that would lead him to the Hindu section of the garden.

A minute later Shawn looked across the space that separated Hinduism from Buddhism in the garden, and could see the distraught man sitting on the ground before a statue of a many-armed goddess. Shawn slowly crossed the space, trying to get an idea in his head of what he hoped to accomplish. When he arrived at the physicist's side, he didn't feel any closer to a plan, so he just sat down nearby and joined the scientist in gazing up at the complex figure.

In the silence of the garden Shawn could hear Dr. Singh breathing deeply, seemingly trying to relax himself, but not succeeding very quickly. Another minute passed before he spoke.

"She stole my work!" he nearly spat out.

Shawn struggled to think of a reply, but then realized he shouldn't take sides. He remembered lessons in active listening from his Hospitality class.

"You mean, your physics work?"

"She must have gotten early access, *unethical* access, to data from the telemetry station. She couldn't wait for the data to go out on the Internet like the rest of us must wait. No wonder at all she didn't want to talk about her work. She was afraid I'd reveal her impropriety before she had a chance to present her research to the Consortium!" As soon as he stopped speaking, his chest heaved with angry emotions.

"So you and she were working on the same project, mapping the ultimaton stream?"

"She's a pirate! And she's in there right now getting all the credit! I can't stand it!" he growled, shaking his fists above his head and looking up at the cloudy sky.

Shawn was silent for a moment, letting the man's fury dissipate. Finally he said, "A lot of this is new to me. I don't understand how she could get any

credit that you won't. Aren't you booth presenting your work at the same conference?"

"Scientific research is a cut-throat world. Whoever presents or publishes first gets all the credit, and history ignores everyone else. Even first by a few hours can make all the difference in the world's eyes. I will be ignored by my colleagues, and the publication of my article in India will count for nothing!"

Shawn could tell that the scientist was on the verge of despair. Even though he didn't share the man's craving for recognition, he was beginning to understand what had happened.

"I wonder..." Shawn said, not sure where he was going, but knowing he had to try something. "I wonder how you can turn this situation around... somehow change this weakness into a strength... somehow make the work that both you and Dr. Tanaka have done come together and reinforce the validity of the discovery... and get you the credit you deserve..."

Out of the corner of his eye Shawn watched the scientist. He was beginning to relax and ponder Shawn's words. But he appeared to need more help.

"What would happen if you presented your work, just like nothing had happened, and in the process acknowledged Dr. Tanaka's simultaneous discovery?"

The Hindu man had his head cocked, considering. "Perhaps that would establish the idea that the discoveries were simultaneous, even though her presentation was a few hours earlier than mine."

"It would to me if I were in the audience. And what would happen if you mentioned that your paper was scheduled for publication in India, and then *invite* Dr. Tanaka to collaborate with you on an article for an international journal?"

Shawn could tell that the other was beginning to relax, so he sat gazing up at the statue nonchalantly, giving the scientist plenty of time for reflection.

"That would be disarming, if anything would be. Then people would know that I had, in a sense, published first. Inviting her to collaborate would take away any impression that I was bragging. And if she refused, it would be obvious to everyone that she was more interested in glory than in science."

"Yes, I think you're right!" Shawn said, glad the man was finally catching

on.

“And I could leave out much of the less interesting data from my presentation, and concentrate on the interpolations I have done that she has probably not yet attempted!”

“Yes!”

“I think this is going to turn out all right after all!” he said in an almost jovial tone.

“And I will have Sister Liberty, who is on the security team, inform Dr. Tanaka that because of the similarity of her work and yours, it will be necessary to combine your demos tomorrow morning!”

Dr. Singh’s face fell.

“Doing so will force her to accept the same position of humility that you have accepted,” Shawn explained.

The dark-skinned man thought about it for awhile. “Yes. You are right. If we did not combine our demonstrations, the wound would be reopened tomorrow.”

“You and she can plan it this evening. Jeff and Liberty and I will help.”

The physicist sat looking at the ground. “You are a wise young man. I must prepare my modified presentation for this afternoon. Can I view a recording of...” He paused to prepare himself to say the name without bitterness. “...Dr. Tanaka’s talk?”

“Sure! Sister Liberty can replay it for you during lunch. I’ll bring you a tray so you can eat as you listen.”

He sat quietly for another few moments, collecting his thoughts. Then he breathed deeply and extended his hand. “Thank you. I have been humbled. And I see that I must humble myself further to avoid looking like a fool.”

Shawn took his hand. “Lyceum will be with you every step of the way. And with Dr. Tanaka, if she is also able to humble herself.”

“At first I thought that Lyceum was just a conference center. Now I see that it is much, much more.”

Yes, Shawn thought as they walked back toward the buildings together, Lyceum was much more than a conference center. He himself had discovered new things about Lyceum because of the situation he had just handled. He hoped he had handled it successfully. That afternoon, and the following day,

would show them all whether or not he had.



Shawn entered the control room and related the entire situation to Liberty and Jeff. They complimented him on his tactful handling of it, and Liberty's respect for Shawn took the first of several leaps forward that were to take place in the coming months. She contacted the Main Office and informed them that she would be combining the two demos, supposedly because of a conflict in facilities scheduling, just in case Dr. Tanaka decided to check with another source.

As soon as the conference adjourned for lunch, Liberty took the appropriate disk and led Dr. Singh to a small viewing room while Shawn dashed to the Dining Hall to get him a tray and Jeff grabbed him some extra writing supplies. Then they all three sat with him as he reviewed the Japanese scientist's complete talk, excited about the opportunity to put their Hospitality and Ethics lessons into practice. With postures and comments and smiles, the trio showed the scientist that they were there for any support he might need.

At times he bristled as he listened to his colleague from another country, another culture. But as her talk ended, he was ready to do what he had to do. He went over his notes with his team of helpers, and they were able to talk him out of one point he wanted to raise that would have sounded like a hurt little child, substituting a compliment he could publicly give his competitor that would increase his credibility. He saw the wisdom of the change.

Finally, with only minutes to spare before his presentation time was scheduled to begin, he felt ready. He took some deep breaths, glanced at the three Lyceum members who had helped him, and walked to the podium with all the confidence he could muster.

"Distinguished scientists, ladies, and gentlemen," he began, "it is my fortune to announce to you that I will be able to shorten my presentation somewhat because my worthy colleague, Dr. Tanaka, has already completed and shared with you a large part of the same research and findings that I would have presented."

A murmur ran through the room.

"It so happens that occasionally in history, a discovery or invention is so timely that it is stumbled upon by two or more persons in isolated

circumstances simultaneously. Some might think that these situations weaken the discovery. From the point of view of the individual seeking fame, perhaps this is so. But from the point of view of science, and the greater good of humankind, this sort of coincidence only lends weight to the discovery or invention. Dr. Tanaka and I come to you today with our hypotheses already pre-tested by an independent scientist living and working a great distance away, and having no foreknowledge of the other's work..."



Dr. Tanaka, already a bit on edge from Dr. Singh's talk, was clearly unnerved when Liberty told her, during the break right after the other's presentation, that she and he would have to collaborate on a demonstration. She did indeed check with whom she thought would be 'higher ups' in the Main Office, and was told the same thing. She looked a little white, but gracefully accepted Dr. Singh's invitation to meet after dinner. She knew she had no choice.

Jeff, Shawn, and Liberty did much to smooth ruffled feathers and keep the process on track during the meeting between the two scientists, and when the time allotted for the demo arrived the following day, they still had much to do. Even though it was not a demonstration in the strict sense, it was being conducted in a similar manner as it required the use of the Planetarium Theater, which could accommodate the scientists and researchers, but not the general conference attendees.

Liberty initiated the holographic projection of the entire solar system, just a few feet above the heads of the audience, and then added Dr. Tanaka's data in one color, and Dr. Singh's data in another color, and the agreement was so astounding that the entire room came to life with sounds of amazement. Liberty then added his interpolations of missing data at several points in the middle, and her extrapolations at both ends of the strangely curving line, and the effect upon the audience was even more profound.

"Now, the question we must ask ourselves is what could cause this strange energy pathway," Dr. Tanaka said with her light Japanese accent. "I have considered twenty-three different natural scenarios that might effect the course of an energy stream of the magnitude we are discussing. The shapes of the resulting curves are being projected now." Then she looked at Dr. Singh.

“And as we watch Dr. Tanaka’s well thought-out scenarios, I will mention that I tested a similar number of natural scenarios, most of them being the same as my colleague’s. Just as she tested some possibilities that I had not considered, I am able to add four scenarios that were unique to my research. The important thing to notice, of course, is that none of the natural forces we considered, a total of twenty-seven in all, in isolation or in complex combination, can cause an energy pathway anything like the one that has been discovered.”

The room erupted with voices, some talking amongst themselves, others trying to get the attention of the presenting scientists.

“Yes, Dr. Vasilenko?” the Japanese lady said.

“I presume you are willing to entertain additional natural causes that others might suggest, and include them in your research.”

“Of course,” she said.

“Most definitely,” Dr. Singh echoed. “That is one reason we want to proceed slowly on our collaboration for a major journal article.”

“But in all fairness to both of you,” another scientist said, “I think it’s obvious to all of us that between the two of you, you have covered the possible natural explanations pretty thoroughly. And none of them gives us the curve we are looking for, or anything remotely similar.”

“I believe your summary is fairly accurate,” Dr. Singh said, “and I appreciate your faith in our work.” The man from India had noticed that the other scientists had accepted the idea that the research had been simultaneous, and he was very glad... and felt grateful toward Shawn. Also, his last traces of resentment toward the oriental lady were evaporating, and being replaced by a feeling of warmth and comfort. At least in one sense, he was no longer alone in his radical research.

“I also appreciate your confidence,” Dr. Tanaka said. “And so we will now show you the correlations we both mentioned in our presentations yesterday.”

“In red we will first see those places in the solar system known to have current or past architectural works,” Dr. Singh said. Three spheres, one of them being the Earth, changed to a bright red. Their locations were common knowledge to any elementary school student.

“And in green we will mark those locations that either contain life now, or

have fossil records of life from the past,” Dr. Tanaka said. Three spheres became green, and the Earth changed to half green, half red. Those locations were generally known to all the scientists and most of the educators at the conference.

But the audience now stared in wonder at the graphic representation of what they had only heard in words the day before. The mysterious ultimatonic particle stream wove a complex and ever-changing course through the solar system, visiting all of those planets or moons that had been colored red or green, and no other spheres... with one exception.

“This obvious correlation leads us to several questions,” Dr. Singh said. “The most profound and far-reaching, it seems to me, is the question *Why*. Why is this stream of energy taking such an unnatural course in order to visit the sites in our solar system where life is or has been?”

“And of course,” Dr. Tanaka began, “we are all wondering what we will find on Ganymede, the one place in the solar system touched by the ultimatonic path that is not yet known to harbor life now nor to have done so in the past.”

The two scientists began taking questions, of which there were many. Luckily for them, questions were only coming from the scientists present in the theater, and not from the students and media representatives watching from Conference Center One. Statistical analyses of the correlations were displayed and discussed, and suggestions were made for ways to tie up loose ends before the theory was published.

The two physicists who had combined their demonstrations didn’t realize it, but they had used all of the time that had originally been allotted to both of them. And even Dr. Tanaka was now so pleased with the outcome that she didn’t think to look for the non-existent conflicting use that had made the combined demo necessary.



After a break, the conference continued with seminars and a panel discussion. Shawn and Liberty overheard the Ultimatonic Path Theory continue to be discussed far into the evening during other activities. They did not witness the following exchange, which took much more courage than the earlier decisions to collaborate on a demonstration and an article.

“Dr. Tanaka?”

“Yes, Dr. Singh?”

“If you’d like, you may call me Hasari.”

“And if you’d like, you may call me Mari.”

“Mari, I know that we don’t have any planning we must do this evening, so I was wondering if you would like to have dinner with me...”

“I would be happy to have dinner with you, Hasari.”

“And perhaps, Mari, after dinner we can take a walk and look at one of the gardens...”

“That would also be nice, Hasari.”



Ashley arrived home that evening, and sat spellbound as Liberty told her what had happened so far during the annual conference of the International Consortium of Physical Scientists. Then Shawn picked up the story, explaining as best he could all about the Ultimaton Path Theory. Ashley’s mouth hung open in wonder when he got to the part about Ganymede.

It was nearly midnight before she finally got a chance to tell them about her trip to central Africa and South Dakota, which paled in comparison to the challenges her friends had dealt with, consisting mostly of airports, airliners, U.N. offices, and bus tours around the central African cities of Libreville, Brazzaville, and Banqui.



The following day was Friday, and the conference continued with the morning devoted to more audio and video presentations, while the afternoon saw panel discussions with all twelve scientists taking part, occasionally fielding questions from the teachers, students, media representatives, and others. There was a heavy emphasis in the questions on issues raised by the Ultimaton Path Theory. The mood during the discussions was very open and candid, since all of the papers had already been presented, and the one instance of duplicate research had resulted in a collaboration. A veritable feast was served to the conference attendees that evening by the members of Lyceum.



On Saturday, the conference was scheduled to adjourn at noon. Each scientist made a short presentation about the future directions of their

research. Dr. Singh and Dr. Tanaka came up together to present their hopes for refining and verifying the Ultimatonic Path Theory, which they hoped would include a probe to Ganymede as soon as possible. But it was Brother Carl who had the honor of the last words during the closing ceremonies in the Ecumenical Temple.

“We have all been challenged by what we have seen and heard. Some of us have been deeply humbled. All of us have been enlightened. We have set foot in new territory, but even though I stand with you today, as fascinated as the youngest student who is only in his or her first semester of general science, I cannot go far into this new territory with you. I have another journey to make soon. So I wish to leave with you an interesting quote.”

He opened a thick book to a marked place and began to read from it.

“Throughout all organized space there are gravity-responding energy currents, power circuits, and *ultimatonic* activities, as well as organizing electronic energies.”

He closed the book thoughtfully. “I added the emphasis. The sentence I just read was written and published more than half a century ago. The author is unknown.”

A murmur of voices filled the huge room, then died down as Brother Carl raised a hand.

“On behalf of Lyceum, may the remainder of your stay be enjoyable and educational. May your research or your studies continue with the Spirit of Truth at your side. May you always remember Galileo, and Newton, and Faraday, and many, many others, perhaps even me...” Chuckles rippled through the room. “But never limit yourselves to what we knew, for we cannot follow where you must go.”

He stepped away from the podium and bowed, and the room was filled with a roaring applause that was reluctant to die down. They knew this was his moment of glory, and it was even possible that they would never see him in the flesh again. There was hardly a soul in the room who didn’t plan on purchasing a copy of the disk that would record the talks, demos, discussions, entertainment, and speeches of the conference. It was destined to be a disk they would cherish for the rest of their lives.



Chapter 3: Counting Losses

By Sunday evening, most of the scientists and other conference attendees had departed, filtering away through the airport or the train station, or returning to nearby colleges and universities. Most of them received a moment of personal appreciation from Brother Carl. With a gleam in his eyes, he shook their hands, knowing he would be granted few, if any, opportunities to see them again.

The conference had allowed Lyceum to add many interesting disks to its library collection, and Liberty had already started to review some of them, dragging Ashley with her on those infrequent occasions when she wasn't busy doing gymnastics or spending time with Jenny.



While many people at Lyceum had been focusing their attention on the properties of mysterious energy paths wending their way through the solar system, most of the world had been closely observing the unfolding events in Central America. An ominous incident had taken place Sunday afternoon, word of which had bounced around the world via the orbiting telecommunications platforms, but the reception of that information by the public had not occurred until air time for the Evening News.

Ashley was at her kitchen shift, but about a hundred Lyceum members, including Shawn and Liberty, were gathered around a large broadcast monitor in the Residential Lobby.

“...it began as a peaceful day, and most local residents had attended Mass

like on any other Sunday. Both the government leaders and the dissidents seemed to be in a mood of reconciliation, even though they had not yet agreed on a meeting location for the talks they had both subscribed to, in principle, last week after the United Nations observers arrived. Then disaster struck. At 4:13 p.m. Eastern Standard Time a bullet came from nowhere and killed one of the international observers. It was not known then or now which side fired that shot. A camera crew on a nearby hill quickly responded, capturing the aftermath of the event, and here we can see the fallen observer, with town's people rushing quickly but cautiously to her aid..."

Everyone could see the light blue of Lyceum's field clothing. Everyone could see that the fallen observer had long, blond hair. Both colors contrasted sharply with the earth tones of the surrounding buildings, the rich greens of the lush tropical foliage, and the dark hair of the local people. Feelings of terror started welling up inside Liberty. Her throat closed itself tightly, and her entire body was covered with sweat within seconds.

"...the bullet that struck the observer is now confirmed to have been a twelve millimeter low-velocity round that killed her instantly. That caliber of ammunition is readily available in Central America. A medic was quickly on the scene, as we can see here, but nothing could be done..."

The viewers could see the police and soldiers coming out of a nearby government building and rushing toward the scene of the sniper attack. Liberty could feel her entire mind and body rebelling at what she was seeing, and she could feel herself teetering on the edge of a black abyss. She stood up while she still could and dashed for the door. Shawn saw her go, but his attention was caught by the newscaster's next statement.

"...then a very interesting thing happened. As you may know, it is standard policy in international aid organizations to cease operations any time an area becomes dangerous for any reason. That generally means that as soon as the first shot is fired, they pack up and leave. The organization providing the blue-suited observers you have been seeing on our news reports for the past week and a half appears to have a different policy. Not only did all of the other observers who were on-duty throughout the city remain at their posts, as soon as the fallen aid worker was carried away, another observer took her place within ten minutes. As you can see on your screens, the

replacement was also female, and appears to be quite young...”

Then Shawn realized that the fallen observer could only be Sister Nancy, and that Nancy was Liberty’s mentor, and that Liberty was probably feeling pretty terrible at that moment and might need a friend. He made his way to the same door and went out.

At first he could not see anyone, but he could faintly hear something. A muffled sobbing, choking sound was coming from the darkness of the trees and bushes not far down the path that led toward Aurora Borealis Hall. He followed the sound, wishing Ashley or someone else was there to help, but also feeling that this was not something that could be put off. He left the walkway and groped his way closer in the darkness.

It wasn’t long before he found Liberty, crumpled into a huddled mass of shaking grief, just a little way down a trail through the wet huckleberry bushes, sitting on the soggy ground under the dripping fir trees. He knelt close beside her and wrapped his arms around her, and she responded by clutching onto him tightly and redoubling the anguish and grief she was pouring out.

There the two friends stayed for many minutes. Liberty was far from any coherent words, still needing to just shake and cry. Many other members had soon realized what had happened and who it would effect most deeply, and had located Liberty on a computer screen or by chance while walking by from their residence hall. As soon as they saw that Shawn was with her, several of them stayed on the path nearby in case they were needed, but they did not intervene.

In the Main Office, Lyceum’s team in Central America had finally gotten through on a SatLink channel, and a secondary support group was being assembled to fly down on the next available airliner to assist the observers already there, replacing any who wanted to return to Lyceum.

While Liberty still grieved in the forest, Ashley and Jason were located, and they soon joined Shawn in comforting their stricken friend. She was still incoherent, feeling a blackness surrounding her, with all her dreams destroyed of having a real mother and a real family for the first time in her life.

When all four of them were starting to shiver from the cold and wet,

Liberty finally began to verbalize the loss she had just sustained. But her words were still mixed with many sobs and screams of despair. A little while later a member crept near with a message.

“Liberty, your father’s on the SatLink. He needs you...”

The grieving girl fell silent. “Oh, my God! My dad must be feeling so terrible!”

With help from her friends, she stumbled into the Main Lobby and found a telecommunications booth. Ashley dashed to the office and had the channel transferred.

“Honey, I’m so sorry...” the tear-stained face of the senator said.

“Me too, Daddy. I know how much she meant to you. I knew something was wrong when she left, but I didn’t know what it was. Please, Daddy, I need to be with you right now. Can I please come home?...”



Six hours later, at about three in the morning, Michael Buchanan arrived at Lyceum. Liberty had been willing to go to Philadelphia, but the senator had needed to get away from the intense pressures he had recently been under, and he reminded his daughter that Lyceum was a much better place to deal with such a grievous loss than was a large, east coast city. He didn’t say so, but he judged that his daughter was not in any shape for a trans-continental airline trip.

So Liberty had reluctantly agreed to await his arrival, and per his request, arranged for him the most secluded accommodations possible. Luckily at that time of year only about half of Lyceum’s hermitage cabins were in use. One was immediately reserved for the senator for as long as he might need it, and appropriate security measures were implemented.

Father and daughter held each other for a long time just outside gate D-14 at Portland International Airport, both grateful for the other, but both aware that something they each needed, which had been so close to coming true, had just been torn away from them forever. All they had left, as far as a family was concerned, was each other. They walked slowly, silently to the waiting Lyceum van.

It was comforting to the senator to be in the place that had been Nancy’s home, and which was still his daughter’s home. They sat by one of the

fireplaces in the Main Lobby for many hours, sometimes talking about little things, sometimes just gazing at the flames. The sun came up somewhere above the winter clouds, and still they sat together as if in a timeless trance. By that time, plans had already been made to cover Liberty's responsibilities for the rest of the week.

It was mid-morning on the day after Nancy had been killed before they wandered to the Dining Hall, picked at their breakfasts, and then ambled toward the senator's cabin, where his luggage had already been delivered.

He looked at the simple log building, with its shingled roof and little windows, and noticed that it was completely surrounded by dripping trees and bushes. Nothing else man-made could be seen, nor could the cabin be seen from anywhere else. "This is nice. And somehow it's proper that it's raining — the trees are as sad as we are."

He went inside, and found a small bed and other simple furniture, a wood stove and plenty of firewood, and a little kitchenette with an assortment of things in the cupboards. "This is what I need for awhile." He pulled a short stool up to the wood stove and busied himself building a fire.

Liberty sat cross-legged on a piece of rug on the floor nearby, breaking kindling for him. "I know you need some time alone, Dad. I guess I do too. But I'd like to spend some time with you every day. Would you like to have breakfast with me tomorrow?"

The sad father smiled at his very perceptive and very intelligent daughter. "As long as you come get me. I have no intention of looking at a clock for at least a week."

She hugged him tightly and then prepared to return to the buildings of Lyceum that were her home. She looked back when she was only a little ways from the hermitage cabin, and saw the wisp of smoke rising from the chimney. She was glad her father would be near for awhile. She needed him right now more than she could ever remember needing him before.



Father and daughter met for one meal each day, and spent some time before or after, usually in some quiet part of Lyceum where they could talk freely. The senator then went alone to the Recreation Center or the Museum or the Hall of Shrines to deal with his own memories of Nancy before

wandering back to his cabin.

On his third day at Lyceum, he and Liberty began reviewing all of the news coverage of the Central American crisis. Liberty saw again the footage that was taken from the nearby hill just moments after Nancy had been shot. It made her cry, but she wiped her eyes when sixteen-year-old Sister Joan had bravely taken Nancy's place at the targeted observation post.

They were both fascinated when they learned that Nancy's body had been taken to the Parish Church, and that just about everyone for miles around, including both the government police and the dissidents, had left their weapons behind and come to pay their respects. By Monday, a meeting place for talks had been agreed to, and those talks had begun on Tuesday and showed promise of bearing fruit very quickly and leading to a compromise that both sides could live with. Both father and daughter were heartened that Nancy's death seemed to have had a purpose.

The Evening News that day confirmed that both sides of the conflict had been very touched by Nancy's death, impressed by the fact that the other observers had stayed at their posts, and moved by the sight of Sister Joan stepping into a position of known danger. Those events had established the credibility of the United Nation's efforts to help reach a diplomatic settlement, and had convinced both sides that the world was serious about the crisis not escalating into an armed conflict.



On Friday of that week, Senator Buchanan began to turn his attention to his work. He knew that Nancy would not have wanted him to abandon the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty or the other important issues before Congress. He began to make phone calls to see how various political processes were shaping up.

Liberty returned to her classes, although she still cherished the time she had with her father. They spent much of Saturday together, both knowing that the end of their shared time was nearing, both knowing that they had lives to continue, even though Nancy could no longer be any part of those lives, as mentor or fiancée, save in memory.

On Sunday morning, Senator Buchanan appeared in the Main Lobby with his suitcases in hand. But he soon learned something that would keep him

there until late that night.

Sister Nancy's body had been watched over by the parish priest for a day before the Lyceum team had arranged for a vehicle and two members to transport it to the capital city. Once there, it could be properly preserved, but bureaucratic regulations had required photographs, samples, a partial autopsy, the payment of three taxes, and the notarized execution of seven forms. The U.N. office had helped all they could, but the process had still taken five days. Finally, on Saturday, the body was cleared for transport to the airport, where airline regulations consumed another day. At long last, on Sunday morning, at about the time Senator Buchanan entered the Main Lobby with his luggage, Nancy was finally on her way home, and Lyceum was alerted. Transfer from the airport was arranged, and a memorial service scheduled for that evening, as there were many people who needed to say good-bye and begin to heal from their loss.

Liberty could tell that her father was glad for an excuse to stay a little longer. Quietly they spent part of the day together, and part of it separately, working on what they wanted to say at the service that evening. Many times sentences were crossed out and rewritten. Many times eyes were dried that had become too wet to see their notebooks.

More than four hundred Lyceum members were there, and another fifty or so people who came from United Nations offices and from Nancy's home town. Her parents came, as well as a sister and a brother.

Liberty had never before felt so clumsy with words as when she attempted to speak at that memorial service. But her love for her mentor showed through clearly. Her father had thought of few words he could say, but he said them fearlessly, and assured everyone present that he would continue to work on all those issues that he knew were important to Nancy.

Liberty cried like a baby when she finally saw the lady's face in the casket, the lady who was supposed to be her mother someday, a better mother than she had ever had before. Her father's face was also wet when he gazed at his beloved, remembering the last time he had seen Nancy alive, her face smiling and laughing with Christmas cheer.

Michael Buchanan finally headed for the airport, promising to return for Nancy's funeral, which would be held as soon as the thirty members in

Central America could return. Several U.N. diplomats who had been at the service were on his flight, so he was able to catch up on recent international events, including the fact that both sides were close to an agreement in the Central American crisis.



Nancy's funeral a week later helped Liberty to say good-bye to her mentor, and she enjoyed seeing her father again. But by then she had something else to think about, something that made her want to sink her teeth into one of the few things that all members of Lyceum did that Liberty had not yet begun.

Ashley was out walking one morning, wrestling with the fact that she had been invited to compete in the National Gymnastics Championships in May, but had absolutely no intention of letting her training cut into her time with Jenny. She was strolling thoughtfully along a pathway behind the playground when she came upon an unexpected sight. There, on the side of the path, on a patch of ground that had never before contained a garden of any kind but only weeds that were kept in check by the grounds crew, sat Liberty, poking at the ground with a little shovel. Some hardy plants in small pots peeked out of a cardboard box near her.

"Hi, Lib! What's up?" she said, sitting down on the edge of the walkway.

"I figured it was about time I started my garden. After, you know, Nancy getting killed and everything, I sort of felt the need for something in my life that was growing instead of..." With a shrug she left her sentence for Ashley's imagination to complete.

"I've got to start one too, I guess, but I didn't think February was a good time to start a garden. There isn't much that's frost-hardy enough to grow yet, is there?"

Liberty looked thoughtful, and had a sad little smile on her face. "You're right. This isn't a good time to grow very many things. A few things, but not everything."

Liberty had recently discovered that she wasn't pregnant. And she had also learned why. The pills she had been taking to lick the one Group B virus she harbored had caused temporary sterility. She had been informed of that side effect, but had started the medication series before she and Jason had become lovers, and so hadn't paid much attention. Now she just looked at the

ground between her knees and let her tears fall on the already wet soil.

Ashley moved closer and put her hand on her friend's leg. "What is it, Lib?"

Liberty looked into Ashley's gentle eyes. "It was so special, the first time with Jason. I just wish... I just wish it could have happened on the first time..." Liberty's words disintegrated into sobs.

Ashley waited until she thought her friend was ready before speaking. "Do you still love him?"

"Uh huh."

"Does he still love you?"

"Yep!" Liberty said, a sparkle coming to her eyes.

"Then time stands still for you, and every time you make love is just like the first time!"

"You really think so?"

"I know so," Ashley said with complete confidence. "You can't imagine how hard it was to take that pill while Tim was here at Christmas."

"So you've felt that craving too?"

"Uh huh."

The two friends embraced each other, there in the mud, beside a little-used walkway, on an early February morning. A light, cold drizzle began to fall on them, but they hardly noticed.



Chapter 4: Farewell to a Shining Star

Ashley was in a particularly jovial mood as she pranced toward the Dining Hall for lunch the following Saturday. She had wrestled with her schedule all week, and with Sister Heather's help, had finally struck just the right balance between her training for the National Championships, her time with Jenny, and her regular work responsibilities and classes, including her new Flight Attendant class, which she was adamant about continuing.

She had also just learned that very morning at the hospital that Karen would be able to walk again. It was going to take months, maybe years of therapy, but the doctors were in agreement that it would someday be possible. She had not seen Karen in a happier mood since before the accident.

As soon as Ashley arrived in the members' section of the cafeteria, she began her usual Saturday chore, which consisted of grabbing carts full of serving dishes from the kitchen, just as the cooks completed them, and rolling them out to the tables, distributing them evenly before the arrival of more than five hundred members made the movement of carts impossible.

Ashley was just finishing when the first wave of members arrived. She was heading back to the kitchen with a cart when Brother Kenneth caught up with her.

"Can you sit with us, Ashley?" he said, nodding toward Brother Chad who was holding three seats.

She didn't have any plans, Liberty was sitting with Jason, Jenny was eating in the Hospice Center with some of the residents, and Shawn was not on

campus. "Sure," she said, realizing they must be wanting to talk about Jenny.

As soon as she joined them, they all filled their plates and then listened to the announcements. To everyone's delight, there were new members to introduce.

"Brothers and Sisters, from Prince Edward Island, please welcome Sister Vanessa!"

A large, black-haired lady stood and everyone clapped and waved.

"And from Italy, please welcome Brother Dario!"

A young man with curly brown hair stood and smiled, and everyone clapped.

"And from Wyoming, please welcome Sister Charleen!"

A skinny girl of about Ashley's age, wearing a cowboy shirt, stood up, looking quite embarrassed but happy, and everyone clapped. Ashley noticed Liberty waving at the new member from the table where she and Jason were sitting.

There were a few routine announcements, after which everyone attacked their plates.

"We wanted to confer with you about Jenny," Brother Kenneth said.

Ashley nodded.

"She has taken pains to hide it from you, but it is getting very hard for her to work on her music," Chad said. "Her attention span is getting shorter and shorter. She gets very little done except when you are there, Ashley. I'm not suggesting you should be there more often. What I'm trying to say is that the effort she puts out during that time is about all she has."

Ashley was afraid of something like this. She knew Jenny had terminal cancer, but as yet had shown no signs of dying. Somewhere in the back of her mind she knew a turn for the worse had to come along eventually.

"She has told me a couple of times now that a haze or darkness is growing around her," the doctor said. "And the last tests show that her tumors are enlarging rapidly."

"Isn't she close to finishing?" Ashley asked.

"Yes," Chad said. "We have only about two and a half minutes of score left to synchronize, one place in Voice Six that needs looking at, and perhaps a little thought given to crescendos and decrescendos. Very little that Jenny

herself needs to do. We've already spent some time talking about instrumentation, and she said she only hears the voices in pure tones. So I had the computer play them on a variety of different instruments, and she indicated a few preferences."

"What we're wondering," Kenneth began, "is whether it would be helpful to Jenny to set some kind of goal, in other words if she would benefit by a tiny bit of pressure..."

"Perhaps for the purpose of a public performance," Chad said. "Do you think she would enjoy attending the first presentation of her symphony, with the Temple filled with a thousand people?"

"Wow. I bet she'd love it! How long would it take to put together?"

"It would have to be soon," the doctor said. "I don't think she'll be with us more than... two or three weeks. Perhaps less."

Ashley closed her eyes. *What should we do, Father? Would Jenny be happiest finishing her music, or just working on it as long as she can?* The answer came almost instantly, as it usually did when she prayed sincerely. She opened her eyes and shared her intuitive knowledge with the doctor and the musician. "Jenny would only be happy if she finished, and heard it performed at least once. She'll handle a little pressure. And I'll be with her a lot."

"So, when should we aim for, two weeks?" Chad asked.

"No. That's too risky. One week," Ashley said, not sure why she felt so confident about what she was saying, but knowing it was important.

Brother Kenneth nodded his agreement.

"It'll be tough getting everything done in a week..." Chad said.

"I'll be able to help," Ashley said. "I'm dropping gymnastics, except for the class I coach, for as long as Jenny needs me."

Both men looked at Ashley, and knew what a sacrifice she was making.

"I can get someone to help with the event arrangements," Chad added. "So... I guess we're talking about next Saturday?"

"We still have to ask Jenny," Ashley said. Then she realized who had to do it. "I'll ask her."

"Be sure to make it clear that it really shouldn't be any later than next Saturday, not without great risk..." Brother Kenneth said.

“I understand.”

As they turned their attention to eating, both men were silently amazed at the strength contained in the little gymnast beside them. And they were not, on this occasion, thinking of her physical athletic abilities.



As Ashley had predicted, Jenny was ecstatic about the idea of her music being performed publicly, in Lyceum's huge Temple, with real musicians, printed programs, ushers, and lights that would move and dance to her music. Ashley kept the situation simple: the following Saturday evening was the only time it could be done. Jenny seemed unfazed, and knew exactly how many bars she still needed to synchronize.

Brother Kenneth and Sister Marscha put their heads together, and with Jenny's permission, added some medicines and herbs to her diet that would help her get the most out of the next week or two.

Jenny's mother was contacted and invited to attend, with transportation paid for by Lyceum, as always, but she said she couldn't possibly travel on such short notice, and didn't really know anything about music anyway, except for what was playing on the local Country and Western station. The member who made that call logged the results in the computer, but decided it was not essential to convey that particular piece of information to Jenny.

Brother Chad and Jenny went to work. They agreed it would be best to break their work sessions into small segments, but to meet more often. Those sessions were scheduled so that Ashley, no longer in gymnastics during the afternoon, could attend them all. Brian, at Jenny's insistence and his delight, would also be there at every session.

Chad also prepared a small portable computer so that they could work in Jenny's apartment while she lay in bed if necessary. But Jenny was so excited about the prospect of a public performance of her song that it didn't look like that contingency plan would be necessary.

Actually, Jenny had no idea what sort of crowd Lyceum could draw by offering a few amenities along with the basic program. And the event planners used Lyceum's considerable connections to make sure that a large number of musicians would be present, including several prominent composers and conductors.

The seven musicians who were selected to play parts of Jenny's symphony began practicing on Monday. Other parts were so complex that Brother Chad decided they were better left to the computer on this occasion. Jenny seemed so happy that real musicians would be playing *any* part of her music that she was beside herself with happiness and embarrassment when she was introduced to them at their first practice. She enjoyed watching their jaws drop as they listened to the first section they needed to practice and realized its unexpected richness and sophistication. At first they had looked at her with respect. Now they looked at her with wonder.

By Tuesday Jenny had synchronized another minute of her music, and had gotten the rough place in Voice Six corrected. The musicians had tried all the sections they would be playing, and felt well challenged, but decided it was within their abilities. Lyceum's ads announcing the concert hit the regional newspapers, and with tantalizing snatches of the symphony itself, were heard on several Seattle, Portland, and Eugene radio stations.

On Wednesday another half minute of score was put behind them, and notations added for the most important volume dynamics. Liberty was happy to learn that she would be the Control Technician, and began to study and annotate the control script. Reservations began to pour in for the banquet that was to be held before the concert. Several record companies also called, having heard the radio ads, but were informed that Lyceum did its own producing.

Thursday was not as productive. The last minute of the symphony was very complex and shifted musical modes several times. By the end of the day, they had only finished about a third of it. Brother Chad knew it was going to be close, but he kept smiling. They did, however, get a few more crescendos scored that they had missed the first time.

By Friday afternoon, Jenny was in tears, Ashley was aching to get back to the gym because she felt completely useless, and Brian, for perhaps the first time in his life, was running out of patience. Brother Chad had a major task keeping their spirits up. He said a silent prayer of thanks that the musicians didn't have to learn the ending to Jenny's song.

That evening, Ashley asked Sister Shannon to cover her gymnastics class, and she skipped French and Dance. She and Brian stayed with Jenny right up

until the moment she fell asleep, and learned one of the reasons Jenny was having so much trouble concentrating. She was beginning to hear music in her mind almost constantly. Needless to say, it was seldom the passage they were attempting to synchronize.



That night Jenny dreamed. To the strains of her symphony, she flew like a bird, floating through canyons and valleys, and amongst mountain peaks and clouds, higher and higher, until she could see the moon and the stars. Then she glided past all the planets and moons, and knew them all by name, but by different names than she had ever heard before. Finally she turned toward the stars, and wanted to go there so badly, but a voice stopped her.

Not yet, Jenny. Soon.

As she glided back through the moons and planets, through the clouds, mountains, and valleys, she heard the ending to her song. All seven voices at once. Properly synchronized.



When Saturday morning dawned, Jenny was as happy and nonchalant as any school girl looking forward to spending the weekend on fun and frivolous activities. She started the morning by warming sweet rolls and making hot chocolate for herself and Brian in her apartment. Brian knew that the best way to make the day happy for Jenny was to spend it doing whatever she wanted to do.

Ashley, however, was still feeling anxious about the unfinished music score and the rapidly approaching concert. She met Jenny and Brian as they were coming out of the Hospice Center, and Brian had to flash her several dirty looks before she got the message and learned to keep her anxieties to herself.

Jenny spent the morning doing all the silliest things she could think of, from walking in the rain and talking to the animals in the barns, to swimming in a hot tub with banana scented bubble bath added. Then the three of them went for lunch in the restaurant part of the Dining Hall, and Jenny ordered all of her favorite foods, including a bacon cheese burger, a taco, and a strawberry sundae.

Brian told the cashier to charge it all to him. She smiled, and then quietly passed the expense along to the Hospice Program.

After lunch, Jenny insisted on going to the Library, where she selected the most action-packed movie she could find. It turned out to be so action-packed that it verged on slapstick, and Jenny giggled for almost the entire hour and a half of battles with inept ninja in crowded Asian cities and high-speed car and helicopter chase scenes in which none of the good guys ever got hurt.

As the three of them stepped out of the viewing room, still laughing about the silliness of the movie, Jenny finally began to talk about her concert that evening, to Ashley's relief.

"Do you think Sister Hillary would mind doing my hair again, like she did at Christmas?"

"I bet she'd love to do it!" Brian said.

"Do you know if Brother Chad is in the Audio Lab?" she asked, turning to Ashley.

"Shall we go find out?"

"Yeah. And I was wondering... will you guys help me tonight? I don't want to use my wheelchair."

"Sure!" they both said at once.

When they arrived at the Audio Production and Editing Lab, Chad was there, staring at a screen full of Jenny's music score, wondering what he was going to do with the last thirty seconds of the song if Jenny wasn't able to finish the synchronizing.

"Hi, Jenny! Come on in, Brian and Ashley! How are you all? I'm *very* glad to see you guys!"

"We've been having fun," Jenny said. "Would it be okay with you if I finished my song now? It won't take long."

"Of course you can! It certainly is beyond me. There are at least *three* different modes dancing around each other, and I *think* they are all coming back together, but for the life of me I don't see how."

Jenny giggled. "They all do. Where were we?"

"At about measure five eighty. Here it is..." He displayed the last section they had worked on.

"Would you play five fifty to five eighty?"

"Sure."

They all listened to the forty seconds of music.

“Wow!” Brian said. “That part really builds up the tension. I bet the ending’s going to be great!”

“There’s a little problem at about five seventy-five... yes, there in Voice One, those eighth notes need to be staccato, all five of them, with a two-measure decrescendo starting there.”

“Yes, I see what you mean...” Chad said, adding the notations.

“Now, in five eighty two, change that half note to a quarter note in Voice Two, and double the length of the rest in Voice Four. Then in bar five eighty-five, line up Voices One through Four on that C sharp, adjusting the rests that come before. Yes... perfect.”

“Oh, yes! Now I can see how it’s coming together! These three voices are modulating from the minor back here to an augmented, while Voice Seven is anticipating the major with a sustained seventh. That is absolutely beautiful! But how do we resolve Voice Five, which is still holding onto this B flat, creating a minor?”

“Watch! That half note in Voice Five should really be a dotted half, with the F sharp disappearing. It was a mistake. Then in bar five ninety, Voice Three crescendos while bridging down to a G natural...”

“Oh, I can see it! That resolves this minor, and the augmented is resolved up here, all except for Voice Two...”

“Yeah. Two is way wrong. Those quarter notes should actually just be a flourish of sixteenth notes, and then the D takes up the rest of the measure.”

“Okay! NOW I see what’s happening. This has got to be one of the most intricate endings ever written. But we’ve still got a mess here in five ninety-four.”

“It’s not as bad as it looks. Add an eighth rest in Voice Two, and dot the E sharp in ninety-six. See how it’s all lining up now?”

“No. Wait a minute... Yes! My God, I’ve *never* seen a chord like that before. It’s contributing to at least three modes at once!”

Jenny smiled. “Four.”

“So *that’s* how the modes are all going to come together. They’ll just all dink around for awhile, sometimes talking to each other, sometimes just doing their own thing, and then suddenly they’ll just all happen to be using

the same chord, and presto!, we forget all about what seemed like chaotic complexity for a moment, and suddenly we're back in major brilliant!"

Ashley and Brian, who were both much less able to imagine what the music would sound like just by seeing the score on the computer screen, looked at each other and shrugged.

Jenny continued her work excitedly. "Everything looks good up to bar six hundred and two, then Voice Seven slips behind. It needs a quarter rest right after the C sharp, and Voice Two is getting ahead so that F shouldn't be dotted..."

"Oh, yes. Oh, YES! The ending is on the screen! This is the home stretch, Jenny, and it's going to be a beautiful finish!"

"I know. I've heard it," she said in a matter-of-fact tone but with a smile on her face. "Let's just line up all those wholes at the end, which are held and faded out..."

"Okay, so Voice One needs an eighth..."

"Yeah. It needs it at the D two notes before. Bridge, please. That way the G aligns with the other voices."

"And Voice Four is a quarter too long..."

"Hmm. Right there at the F sharp."

"Make that a dotted half?"

"Yeah. Perfect."

"That's it! The finishing notes are synchronized! Where should I play it from?"

"Umm... five seventy-five."

They all listened as the ending tangled itself, and then suddenly resolved all of its musical themes in a completely satisfying major chord so broad it would have been impossible to play on any keyboard. But they had all heard a couple of things that didn't sound right.

"Please display measure six twelve..." Jenny said.

"Right here?" Chad's fingers danced on the computer's keys, knowing they were very close to finishing.

Jenny giggled. "That A in Voice Three should be an A flat."

"Okay..."

"And in six eighteen... um... it must be the bass note in Voice Seven."

“It sounds dissonant. What does it need?”

“Let’s drop it a third.”

“Hmm,” Chad said, noticing the note change color on the screen. “Computer says it just went below the range of human hearing.”

Jenny closed her eyes. Everyone waited anxiously. After a good half minute, she opened them. “That’s okay. It’s not just for human ears.”

Chad smiled at Ashley, Ashley grinned at Brian, and then they all surrounded Jenny with hugs and compliments for finishing the editing of her song. Then Chad had the computer play it beginning to end. Jenny changed one more note, and added a few staccato marks, but could think of nothing else she could do to improve it. And she looked very, very relieved.

They all looked at each other in silence. The three Lyceum members were becoming aware of the immensity of the task Jenny had just completed. The last five months of her life had been devoted to the creation of the musical work they had just heard, and Jenny had spent the two years before that playing parts of it on a plastic penny whistle out on the back porch of a nursing home. Now she was expected to live only a few days longer, maybe a few weeks at the very most. It was her life work. She would never earn college degrees, never have a career, never marry, and never have children. This song was all she could leave behind. It was truly her one and only opus magnum.

Finally Ashley broke the silence.

“What do you want to call it?”

“Gosh... I don’t know! But isn’t it time for Sister Hillary to do my hair?”

They all laughed, and then Brian excitedly pushed Jenny out of the editing lab to keep her beauty appointment. Ashley headed toward her residence hall to shower and dress for the concert, and Chad turned his attention to developing the control script that would tell the computer when to play and when to defer to the musicians, when to control the laser projectors, and when to activate the shining stars that Liberty was busy hanging in the Ecumenical Temple at that very moment. He knew he had to work quickly.



When Jenny, with her elegantly curled hair almost touching her shoulders for the first time in years, stepped into the banquet room wearing a lacy white

dress, nearly two hundred people, all in formal attire, stood and clapped. She immediately turned red.

Standing at her side holding her hand, Brian wore a dark brown suit and tie. He was not embarrassed, but he was deeply touched. They were clapping for his Jenny, the girl whose life had become intertwined with his during the last several months. They were clapping for the girl he had grown to care about more than anyone or anything else. They were clapping, he suddenly realized, for the girl he loved.

Standing on her other side, holding her other hand, Ashley wore her light green pants suit. As she listened to the applause, she was feeling very happy that the risk she had taken by bringing Jenny to Lyceum had not been in vain. Jenny had been able to finish her song, had heard it played all the way through by the computer, and would soon hear it performed for a live audience. Ashley knew that Jenny had other dreams, like having long and beautiful hair, but she felt powerless to help Jenny make those other dreams come true. She had done all she could. She hoped it would be enough...

Brother Chad, sporting a tuxedo, introduced all three of them, and then gave the guests a brief account of how Jenny was discovered and brought to Lyceum, and how her symphony was laboriously recorded and edited. He did not talk about Jenny's impending death. The fact that she was terminally ill was already known to everyone present.

Jenny found herself seated across from Raymond Kaiser, the conductor of the Pacific Northwest Festival Orchestra, a quiet man of about fifty with somewhat untamed hair, who exuded a charismatic presence. Next to him sat Clarina Drake, a composer with scores of published songs to her credit, many of them well known. She looked at Jenny with searching but kind eyes. Both had been briefed by Lyceum, and had agreed to not pump Jenny with questions, but instead to talk about their own work and to make her feel a part of the larger community of professional musicians.

Everyone ate prime rib or scampi, sipped fine wine or sparkling grape juice, and savored raspberry cheese cake as the conductor and the composer took turns sharing amusing tales from their lives. Jenny began to realize that the joys and sorrows she had experienced getting her music ready were not at all unique. Her eyes and ears were open wide throughout the entire meal, and

when not sampling the tasty foods, she was smiling.

After dinner, everyone made their way to the Ecumenical Temple, and Jenny's two friends again steadied her as she walked along slowly with the banquet guests. To Jenny's delight, an usher handed her a program and showed them to their reserved seats. Once settled, the ten year old looked with happiness at the seven chairs and music stands arranged in a circle on the floor of the Temple below her. She was still, at that point, expecting the performance to consist of the Lyceum musicians just sitting down and playing her song. She had no idea what Chad and Liberty had concocted.

By the time seven o'clock arrived, the audience numbered over eleven hundred, and Jenny's eyes got bigger and bigger as they kept pouring in. Finally, when everyone was seated, the musicians filed in, bowed, and everyone clapped. They sat down, tuned their instruments, and turned to the first page of their scores. Everyone waited anxiously, silently.



A clarinet began, joined by a violin, countered by a flute, and echoed by a harp. The first theme was interesting but simple, and the musicians played just as Jenny had expected them to. It was her music. She knew every note, every rest, every chord. And she smiled, hearing them play.

But when the second theme began, the musicians teamed up on three of the voices, and the computer took up the other four in pure tones. The stars that Liberty had hung began to pulse to the music, a different group of stars for each voice, a different color for each tone. The wires that suspended them were so fine they couldn't be seen, and Jenny gazed up at them in wonder, realizing that they too were playing her music.

The first bridge was so intricate that the musicians rested their instruments and the computer took over, but instead of pure tones, Jenny heard a variety of rich sounds that could not be made by any instruments she knew.

And then the next theme began, rhythmic, pulsing, dancing. The French horn and the clarinet took the prominent melody voice, and the computer synthesized the other voices in the background. The laser projectors began to trace pictures on the ceilings and floors of the Temple, pictures that appeared and disappeared even as Jenny tried to glimpse them, pictures that spoke of

prancing and dancing and leaping with joy, just as the music spoke of the same things in a different language. The ten-year-old's mouth alternated from agape with wonder to grinning with delight.

Then the first major transition came. Jenny knew that transition well, but was almost startled by the way it was executed. The Temple went completely dark for the whole four-count rest that ran across the music score at that point, and then a single laser danced on the floor in the center of the circle of musicians as an unseen flute took up the next theme, slowly joined by instrument after instrument, laser after laser. Jenny quickly recovered from her start of a moment before and let out a giggle of delight.

The next bridge was majestic and triumphant, and the computer created the rich sounds of a complete orchestra as more than a hundred stars throbbed brilliantly to the music. But it did not resolve the tension it had created, and suddenly the French horn was seen in a single spotlight as the other lights faded out. In its clear voice it began the next theme, while the other musicians took up the quieter voices.

It was a relaxing theme that Jenny always enjoyed hearing. For the first time since the symphony started she turned her head and looked around. Nearly fifteen hundred people were sitting with rapt attention listening to her music. Old people, grown-ups, kids like her, even young children. Everyone was listening. She suddenly felt overwhelmed with happiness. She had never, in her wildest dreams, imagined that more than a few of her friends at Lyceum would ever want to listen to her song.

Then the section began that Brother Chad lovingly called *The War of the Worlds*. It was probably the most complex part of her song, and brought the bone-scraping tension to its peak. The computer provided everything from the shrillest whistles in Voice Two to the throbbing drumbeats in Voice Seven, while lasers of many shapes and colors dashed around the Temple, colliding, recoiling, tangling and untangling. Jenny had never been comfortable with that part of the song, but Brother Chad had reassured her that it was meant to make the listener uncomfortable, in order to emphasize the beauty of the themes that followed.

Fifteen minutes into her song, Jenny's favorite parts began. Several of the musicians joined the computer in the part she called *Water*, with its flowing,

undulating melodies and cool, quiet harmonies. Different musicians executed the section she referred to as *The Playground*. Its frolicking tunes and laughing rhythms always made her remember the times, many years ago, when she had been able to actually play in the park in Rapid City. She hoped the children who were listening liked it.

She knew her music was nearing its end when the part she called *Thunder* started, booming and crashing, with tiny, delicate melodies appearing just in time to be purposefully drowned out. Then all of the themes from the entire piece returned, as if to say fare-well. The shining stars glimmered and the lasers danced, and everyone sat wide-eyed, remembering their favorite passages. Suddenly all of the voices came together in a fantastically beautiful, completely satisfying chord that made everyone feel like they were bursting out of the water and into the air, or out of a cave and into the daylight. All of the musicians were standing, adding their instruments to the computer's tones to further enrich the ending. Finally the chord faded, the musicians bowed in a spotlight, the house lights brightened, and the audience roared with applause and whistles of appreciation.

Ashley and Brian stood along with everyone else and clapped. But Jenny was happy just to sit in her seat. She had just witnessed her beloved music performed. She had heard it all, right up to the ending chord, seen all of the dancing lasers and shining stars, watched the musicians play and then bow. Now she was feeling very tired, very drowsy, and even though she knew the people around her were standing and clapping, the sound was becoming faint and the lights in the Temple seemed to be dimming out. She realized what was happening, and she knew she had to say good-bye quickly.

"Ashley?"

"What, Jenny? Do you want us to help you stand up?"

"No. I can't hold back the darkness any longer, Ashley. Thank you. Thank you so much for being my friend. Please tell Brother Chad thank you."

"I'm right here, Jenny," the audio technician's voice said and Jenny felt a hand on her knee.

"Please take good care of my music."

"I promise, Jenny."

"Brian?"

She felt her hand being squeezed.

"I'm right beside you," his voice said.

"Brian, you're so special. I don't want to leave, but I can't stay any longer. I love you!"

Brian was completely unable to respond. His heart was pounding and his throat was clenched shut. But he squeezed Jenny's hand again, and she felt it and knew everything he was unable to put into words.

"Ashley?" the seated girl said in a weak voice.

The thirteen-year-old gymnast wanted to run or scream or cry. But she managed to choke out an appropriate word. "Yes?"

"Back to the Stars."

After whispering those words, Jenny closed her eyes, knowing they were no longer any use to her, and her body relaxed and settled against Brian. Jenny never knew that Brother Kenneth arrived a moment later, gently took her vital signs without disturbing the vigil of her friends, and shook his head in impotence. She was beginning to be able to see again, but she knew it was not with her eyes, and she could hear music being played, her own and other pieces even more beautiful, but not with her ears. She saw the planets and the moons swish by, and from her Seraphim-enshrouded comfort, free of all fetters and weights, she called out the mysterious names of the passing spheres with a loud, happy voice. Then she looked and saw the stars awaiting her, and knew it was time to go there. She bade the Seraphim take her, and even though she never forgot her friends, she never looked back...



The applause faded, and Ashley knew it was the time in the program when Jenny would have been helped to the floor of the Temple to take her bows. Instead, Brother Chad was gathering Jenny's lifeless form in his arms. He carried her toward the nearest exit, with Brian at his side still holding her limp hand.

Ashley would have loved to just sit there and cry. But she had brought Jenny to Lyceum, and so now she had just one more thing she had to do for her departed friend. She squeezed her eyes tightly shut for a moment to clear them, and then walked down the steps to the floor of the Temple. Liberty focused a small spotlight and added the necessary amplification.

“I’m Sister Ashley. The creator of the beautiful music you just heard, Jenny Clark, had two dreams. One was to finish her music, and the other was to hear it performed. She lived just long enough for both of those dreams to come true. Thank you, all of you, for helping her with her second dream. The last words she spoke were, ‘Back to the stars.’ She hadn’t given her song a name yet, so I think that’s what she wanted it to be called.”

Ashley looked at the floor for a moment and took some deep breaths.

“You are all invited to a reception in Conference Center One. I’m sorry that Jenny can’t be there. Those of us who knew her will be there, and we will try to tell you what she was like, but it may not be easy for us. Thank you for understanding. Good night.”

Ashley didn’t realize that tears had been streaming down her cheeks during her entire closing speech until it was over and she was receiving hugs from Sister Heather, Shawn, and other friends. And she never did understand why the audience applauded her words.

Her friends knew why.



Chapter 5: A Time of Reflection

Sister Laura, who at other times was the Children's Librarian in Rapid City, South Dakota, had called the next-door neighbor before appearing on the doorstep of the Clark residence. The neighbor had rushed over to tell Mrs. Clark that company was coming. It was a rare enough occurrence.

That small rental had once been the home of a family consisting of mother and daughter. Then it had become the abode of the mother alone, with infrequent visits from the daughter who resided only a quarter mile away in the Rapid City Convalescent Center. Then, for the last five months, the daughter had been residing in Oregon, and the humble doorstep had not seen her passing. Now, she would come no more.

It took awhile for Sister Laura to talk Mrs. Clark into turning off the television. Luckily a half-hour segment began for which the large lady had no soap opera or game show loyalties. There were few such half-hour segments during the day.

Sister Laura began by emphasizing how Jenny had been able to fulfill her dream of finishing her music. The large human form taking up most of the old couch did not seem to hear. She was staring at the wall. As simple minded as she might be, it was obvious to her that this visit from a Lyceum member could mean only one thing. Not knowing what else to do to soften the news, Sister Laura went on to explain that Jenny had passed away without any pain, and with friends around her. Mrs. Clark continued to stare at the wall.

The non-resident member had been prepared to comfort a grieving mother. After an hour of attempting to say little comforting things, and getting no response, she decided that this particular mother's grieving process was going to be different than she had expected. She got her first response when she suggested that they go out to eat.

To Sister Laura's complete surprise, Mrs. Clark just picked at her food. But the presence of the hot roast beef sandwich somehow brought her out of the state of shock she had been in.

"Was Jenny... happy there?"

"From what I understand, she was very happy, except that it took a great personal effort to last as long as she did. But she wanted so much to finish her music that she fought hard..."

"When is her funeral?"

"At your convenience. How soon can you come?"

Mrs. Clark was silent for a moment. Very little in her life had ever been at her convenience.

"I don't suppose I get to stay for a week anymore..."

Sister Laura had neglected to discuss this subject with Brother Kenneth when he had called with the details of the assignment. But she was a Lyceum member, and she knew that gave her the authority, and the responsibility, to make the best possible decisions in any unexpected situation.

"Part of saying good-bye to someone is saying good-bye to places that were special to one or both of you. Lyceum would be happy to have you for another week or two during and after the funeral..."

The large lady stirred her mashed potatoes thoughtfully. "Thank you," she said in a more humble tone than she had used in many years.



February 19th

Dear Mrs. Clark,

This letter is to formally notify you that your daughter, Jenny Clark, passed away at 7:53 p.m. on February 17th. I was nearby, was with her within moments of her loss of consciousness, and determined that nothing could be done to revive her, as her cancerous tumors were at that time in an

advanced stage of growth. Her death appeared to be painless, and that is typical for the type of cancer she had.

She was immediately taken to the clinic, where I performed a more thorough examination and declared her deceased at 8:05 p.m. Her body is now in cold stasis in the Lyceum Mortuary awaiting her funeral and burial, which will be held on February 25th, as you have indicated meets with your approval and travel plans.

The first performance of the musical work composed by your daughter was attended by 1,532 people, and a royalty statement is enclosed, together with a check for \$4,135, which is the 40% of net receipts that are payable to your daughter's estate.

Enclosed is also a voucher for up to two weeks of lodging, meals, and other services at Lyceum to assist you with this time of grief. Also, we would be happy to have you as our guest for Memorial Day, or any more convenient weekend, every year so that you can visit your daughter's resting place.

Jenny will be missed by all of us. Her musical work will be published in the near future, and royalty statements and checks will be mailed to you quarterly. If you have any questions or needs that we have not addressed, please feel free to call or write.

Sincerely,

Kenneth Partlow, M.D.



In mid-February, a new theme appeared in the sermons of the Reverend Tommy Mitchell. That theme included the name *Lyceum*, and it was not for the purpose of thanking the international service organization for the services it had provided the reverend and his family more than two years before.

Luckily, a Lyceum member was present at one of the first sermons that contained that new theme. Assignments quickly went out to non-resident members in all the cities where the Reverend Mitchell was scheduled to preach, and the reports flowed back over teledata or SatLink channels. Lyceum had a problem.

Both Shawn and Liberty were asked to attend the next meeting of the

Lyceum Council, which was devoted largely to that problem and its possible solution.



Sister Rebecca began, her weathered, angular facial features accented by her gray hair. “We have all reviewed the security report that Brother Shawn, Sister Liberty, and Brother Fred authored. It was very thorough, but...”

“But we completely missed the obvious,” Liberty interrupted. “We didn’t want to believe he would use twisted religious dogma and emotional scare tactics!”

Those words jabbed deep into Shawn’s heart. She was talking about his own father. But he also knew, underneath the emotions he was feeling, that she was very close to correct.

“You *do* have a way of getting right to the point, Sister Liberty,” the elderly member who had been speaking said. “And I honor that quality in you. We are going to need to be very honest with ourselves about what we are up against, if we are going to successfully deal with the threat that has arisen. Let us begin with a brain-storming on all aspects of the problem, before we begin to ponder possible solutions.”

“I want you all to know that it’s going to be hard for me to sit here and listen to everyone talking about my father,” Shawn said, his voice revealing his deep feelings on the subject.

“We understand,” Brother Felix said in a comforting tone. “We are also aware that what is happening could severely damage, perhaps even destroy Lyceum, if left unchecked. Even though it will be hard for you, can you do it? Can you... will you help us with your insights about the man who is attacking Lyceum from the pulpit, the man who happens to also be your father?”

Liberty, who was sitting next to Shawn, moved closer and took his hand in hers. She knew he was going to need all the strength in the world to do what they were asking him to do.

Shawn took a deep breath. “I’ll... try very hard. I don’t like what he is doing either.”

“Thank you, Brother Shawn,” the tall, white-haired man said. “And we’ll be beside you every moment, and we’ll be with you still even if you need to step out of the process occasionally. And I assure you that we will deal only

with the problem, and do nothing to hurt your father in a personal, vengeful way.”

“I understand,” Shawn said. “And I’m sorry that I didn’t realize sooner he’d do something like this. Liberty’s right. It was obvious, but we didn’t want to consider it.”

“No one holds you accountable for your oversight,” Sister Rebecca said. “It was understandable, and it is obvious that you have learned from it.”

The fifty-three council members and the two guests spent the next two and a half hours discussing every aspect of the problem that confronted Lyceum, from the possible loss of revenue from certain churches and groups who might take their conference business elsewhere, to security issues that would arise if followers of the Reverend Mitchell attempted acts of vandalism or sabotage. It was generally agreed that the evangelist could have no effect on Lyceum’s international reputation or its diplomatic work. Lyceum’s primary vulnerability, they realized, lay in its new Atlanta campus, scheduled to open in less than four months. If local public opinion turned against the new campus, situated in a part of the country where the Reverend Mitchell and other evangelists had significant influence, the damage could be nearly irreparable.

The Council adjourned, and everyone spent the rest of the morning and the afternoon at their regular activities while pondering what they had heard. Shawn attended the meeting of the team working with Marty Jelwen, and then had a quick lunch with Sarah, sharing with her his feelings and concerns. She didn’t know much about the politics of religious evangelists, but her hug and the gentle caress of her strong mind, just before Shawn ran off to his Children’s Program shift, reassured him that he was with friends who would stick with him no matter what happened.

The children kept his mind off the weighty issues, but during Greek language class, he began to feel very guilty. He realized that none of this would be happening if he hadn’t come to Lyceum. By dinner he was convinced that he had the primary responsibility to solve the problem his father was creating, if he possibly could. He just didn’t know how.

When the Lyceum Council reconvened that evening, it so happened that many of the councilors were of the same opinion, not because the problem

they were facing was Shawn's fault, but simply because he was the one who could most effectively solve it.

Shawn listened carefully as member after member agreed with the idea that Shawn would have to confront his father, publicly if at all possible, preferably at one of his upcoming televised revivals where about ten thousand people would be present, and another two million watching from their homes. The thought would have scared him white, except that it would also fill his personal need to absolve himself of the guilt he was feeling. He couldn't imagine coming back to Lyceum to live for even one more day after he went to see his father unless he did everything humanly possible to put this mess behind them for good.

"It will be the hardest thing I've ever done, standing up there alone to confront my father. But I know I have to do it," he said after the basic plan had been fleshed out by the councilors.

"No one envies you the task you must do," Sister Ruth said, "but you will be far from alone. There will be security people to protect you, and I'm sure your friend Liberty would be happy to be one of them..."

Liberty nodded enthusiastically.

"There will be additional Lyceum people throughout the audience for psychological purposes. I'm sure your friend Sarah, and Sister Rachael as well, will make good use of their talents in that area. And a number of technicians will be necessary. Your mentor Brother Jacob will be near, and your friend Ashley, and anyone else you want at your side. I can easily see a team of fifty to a hundred Lyceum members heading for Birmingham on April seventh. No, Shawn, you will not be alone."

Shawn brightened. "Thank you. But I still have to be the one to speak to my father. I hope I'll know what to say..."

Sister Maria stood. "That is where the still, small voice inside you comes into play, Shawn, and the legions of angels who will be with you watching and listening. If your father is going to try to hurt others with lies and twisted theology, his indwelling spirit and his guardian angel are going to be unhappy with him. Stick with the truth, and you will have help beyond your imagination!"

Shawn smiled as Sister Maria sat down.



Liberty was peering into a vivarium in the Residential Lobby that contained a variety of reptiles while cleaning the dirt out from under her fingernails. Gardening class that day had been spent in the greenhouses transplanting tender little things into larger pots and planters, and talking about root shock and soil compatibility and other issues very important to the little green things who were at that moment completely dependent upon their human caretakers for life or death. Jason would get off work soon, and they planned to go for a walk and see what was sprouting in the woods.

The sixteen-year-old boy had noticed how his lover had become much more interested in small, delicate things ever since her mentor had been killed, and that she had become much quieter and more thoughtful, enjoying long walks during which they would often be silent for many minutes at a time.

As she was having a staring contest with a king snake, knowing well who would win, her pager chimed softly. She had recently reprogrammed it for a softer, quieter tone.

“Liberty Rae here...”

“Your father’s on SatLink channel two.”

“Thanks, Heidi.”

After scribbling a note for Jason at a nearby desk and sticking it onto the vivarium, she walked toward the office in the Main Lobby, wondering how her father was doing.

As soon as she entered the telecommunications booth and selected the channel, she could see that her father was in his office in the Capital Building.

“Hi, Dad.”

“Hello, daughter of mine. Do you have a new mentor?”

“No. Do you have a new fiancée?” she replied in a soft but challenging voice.

The senator cleared his throat. “I’m a little too old to go looking again purposefully. If someone happened to come along with anything like Nancy’s qualities, I’d consider it. But you’re *not* too old to have a mentor.”

“If someone happens to come along with anything like Nancy’s qualities, I’ll consider it.”

He was silent for a moment, feeling irritated with his stubborn daughter. Then he softened. "You are your father's daughter, aren't you?"

"Last time I checked my birth certificate..." she said and smiled.

The senator smiled back from his office two and a half thousand miles away. "I have a purpose for calling. I need an impartial, respected host for a high-level international four-day conference on the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty. Facilities need to be up-scale and exclusive, confidentiality needs to be absolute, and security needs to be excellent."

"You called the right place, Dad!"

"And I need it in two weeks."

"Ouch. Let me see what I can do."

Liberty touched an intercom button that connected her directly to the office. She related the conference requirements to Sister Heidi, who began working at her computer screen. Senator Buchanan added more details as the process continued.

"Our main problem is going to be a group of thirty school children from Montana who are staying over the first night of your conference," Sister Heidi's voice said.

"Ages?" the senator inquired.

"Eight to eleven, with two adults along."

"No problem, as long as we can do a security check on the adults and brief them. Any facilities conflict?"

"None. They're here for the science labs," the member in the office said. "We could even lodge them in the residence halls to help keep things separate."

"Okay," he said, "let's set it up. Consider it top-secret. All public knowledge will come through the President. He plans to announce it to the media the day the conference begins, but still keep the location hush hush."

"Wow. That means we have to close Lyceum for a few days without saying why!" Liberty said, a little unsure of the propriety of the situation.

"That's right. Or you could do like the government and lie about the reason — plumbing problems or something," her father suggested.

"But won't people figure it out when all of a sudden Lyceum's closed and the President announces there's a conference going on somewhere secret?"

“Yes, but hopefully not in time to sabotage it.”

“I see,” Liberty said.

“How about *Closed For Remodeling?*” Heidi suggested. “The Welcome Center needs a new coat of paint as I remember.

Liberty chuckled, remembering that the Welcome Center’s walls were almost entirely glass.

“I’ll inform the President, and an advance team will be out in a day or two. Thanks, Honey. Now, about that mentor...”

“I’ll get a new mentor when I’m good and ready, father of mine. Now, if you don’t mind, I have a date with a very cute boy.”

“Well, now I *know* I’ve lost!”

“That’s right, Daddy! Will I see you at the conference?”

“Yes, but that fact has to remain between you and me.”

“Good. I love you, Daddy!”

“I love you too, Honey.” With a satisfied but slightly sad look on his face, he closed the channel and the screen went blank.



Sister Laura offered to accompany Mrs. Clark to Lyceum for her daughter’s funeral. As no objection was forthcoming, she quickly booked a sleeping room on a train that would get them to Portland the day before. She knew it was going to be one of the more unpleasant assignments she would carry out for Lyceum. She was right.

After two days of bus and train travel, Mrs. Clark’s mood seemed to have improved somewhat. She was approaching the one place where she was welcome without reservation, where people didn’t laugh at her, and where she could enjoy life for two whole weeks without accumulating any bills. It was easy to forget that there would be a difference on this particular trip.

Sister Laura, however, was completely fried by the two days of shared accommodations, and was looking forward to a relaxing hot pool soak, the company of friends she hadn’t seen in several months, and a good night’s sleep. She very much hoped that others could tend to all of Mrs. Clark’s needs after they arrived. That wish had been anticipated.

When Ashley greeted Mrs. Clark, the gymnast was in her leotard. She had tried to return to her normal training routine that week, as the National

Championships were less than three months away. But she had found that she was so distracted by thoughts of Jenny that her concentration was poor and she was falling from the balance beam repeatedly and coming very close to missing the uneven parallel bars on her release moves. She and her coaches had decided, by Tuesday afternoon, that a week or two spent only on basic skills and conditioning was probably necessary. Ashley hoped that the funeral would allow her to regain her focus.

As she shook the bulbous lady's hand, Ashley saw a different look in that face than she had ever seen before. The eyes weren't shifting from side to side as was their previous habit, constantly searching for something to eat, Ashley had always presumed. Now they seemed unfocused and confused, unsure about the meaning of events that were unfolding. Ashley could tell that those eyes did not, as yet, understand what had been lost, and were not, as yet, grieving.

Mrs. Clark and her luggage were taken to her favorite room, and Ashley returned to the gym for a little more tumbling practice, after which she planned to curl up in bed and work on her notes about what she wanted to say at Jenny's funeral. The only thing she knew for sure was that she didn't want to talk about Jenny's music. She knew others would be doing that, and parts of Jenny's song would be played during the funeral. She had other things to say.



Mrs. Clark had been invited to speak at her daughter's funeral. She had immediately declined, but during breakfast on that quiet Sunday morning in late February, the member who was her companion heard her mumbling to herself, seemingly pondering what words would be appropriate. A message was sent to the funeral coordinator to plan for the possibility that Jenny's mother would speak.

After breakfast, the large lady was presented with two new dresses that had been made for her by a Lyceum member. For a while she sparkled, knowing painfully well how little was available in her size. She immediately selected one of them to wear that afternoon.

Those who had been closest to Jenny had no responsibilities at the funeral other than to participate as each could. Ashley attended the inspirational

service and went to the gym for some very basic work on the balance beam, and then spent the early afternoon quietly looking over her notes and slowly getting dressed. Brother Kenneth went on a long walk alone, thinking of all the patients he had lost... and all the patients he had saved. Brother Chad wandered about the editing lab where Jenny had spent so much time working on her symphony, and then he listened to some of his favorite Mozart in his apartment while dressing. Brian was nowhere to be seen.

When the hour of the funeral finally arrived, everyone who had known Jenny made their way solemnly toward the Ecumenical Temple, along with about two hundred other members, nearly a hundred others from the region who had attended her concert, and one nurse from the Rapid City Convalescent Center, all wanting to pay their respects. Mrs. Clark looked around her in confusion.

“Why are all these people here?”

“They all knew your daughter,” her companion said. “Some were close to her. All of them know of her or have heard her music. We’re reserving some time for you to speak if you decide you’d like to...”

“Oh... no... I wouldn’t know what to say.”

Nearly four hundred people slowly gathered in the lower circles of the Temple. Even those who weren’t seated high enough to see into the casket had been able to gaze upon the deceased as they had come down the aisles. What they saw was no sickly invalid, but a beautiful girl just approaching the flowering of her youth, with golden shoulder-length hair done as she would have liked, and a full pink dress with accents of white lace. Flowers were tucked in around her and many more filled vases nearby. Only one thing seemed strange: one of her arms lay upon her chest, its hand empty.

A quiet passage from Jenny’s song opened the funeral, with the sounds and laughter of children at play superimposed. After a minute the audio faded to an unobtrusive background, and the nurse who had known Jenny before she came to Lyceum stood and spoke. She had brought with her words of remembrance from several others who had known Jenny in the nursing home. She concluded by stating that she was ordering several copies of *Back To The Stars* for delivery as soon as it was published, one of which would be played for all the nursing home residents who remembered its composer.

The part of the symphony that had always troubled Jenny the most preceded Brother Kenneth's time. He talked about how she had been willing to try almost anything, as long as she could grow her hair back and work on her music. He spoke of how the darkness had gathered and pushed in upon her consciousness, and how she had fought it for weeks in order to finish her work and say good-bye to her friends. And he spoke of the serene patience and understanding that Jenny had shown, and the insight she now possessed into the greatest mystery of life, an insight that no mortal present at the funeral could claim. Then he went back to his place.

The computer generated all seven voices of the approach to the climax of *Back To The Stars*, and lasers created musical notes that danced on the edge of the casket and finally floated away, higher and higher, until they disappeared somewhere above the highest balcony of the Temple. Brother Chad stood. He had much to say about the creative power the world had lost when Jenny passed away, and he invited the listeners to imagine the many beautiful works that would have been written if Jenny had been able to stay with them. He ended by describing the presence that now existed in the editing lab, a presence that, at least for him, would never be exorcised or forgotten.

After everyone listened to Ashley's favorite part of the song, the section she had always called *Tumbling*, she talked about all the things that Jenny liked to do other than work on her music, such as take walks in any kind of weather, and watch just about any movie or planetarium show at least once. She told about the walks they had taken back in Rapid City to get snacks and go window shopping, and the many tea parties they had shared in Jenny's room in the Hospice Center. Finally she described the words of farewell Jenny had spoken at the conclusion of her first and only concert.

Before Ashley had a chance to leave the podium, a figure began to descend from the uppermost rows of seats that were currently unlit. It was a small figure wearing a simple brown robe and carrying something about a foot and a half long. Ashley watched the figure enter the light, and realized that her guess was correct. Everyone followed her gaze.

Brian came slowly down to the bottom of the Temple, his steps revealing the great sadness that weighed upon him. He said nothing, but held Jenny's

recorder out to Ashley.

She understood. He wanted her to give it to Jenny for the last time. But also he needed to say good-bye to the ten-year-old as much, or more, than anyone else. She accepted the recorder from him, but then held out her hand to him and stood there waiting.

He had wanted to slink away at that point, but realized that Ashley, already known for her strength and assertiveness in trying situations, wasn't going to let him do it. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he took her hand and allowed himself to be led. Together they approached the casket.

Ashley placed the instrument into Jenny's empty fingers. Then she squeezed Brian's hand with a grip that came from eight years of gymnastics training. He knew she expected him to do his part.

He closed his eyes to try to get a moment of relief from the crushing hurt he felt. Suddenly he knew what he longed to do. He opened his eyes and looked at Jenny's lifeless body. Then he leaned into the casket and kissed her for the last time. Her skin was cold and stiff, and that unmistakable feel of death made him burst into sobs as he turned and headed quickly toward the nearest exit.

But as he was passing the second row of seats, something made him stop. Ashley was walking beside him, but hadn't done anything to bring him to a halt. He looked around, and his eyes met two other very sad eyes. Not knowing why he did so, his hand reached out, and the large lady stood and was soon standing there in the aisle with Brian and Ashley crying her eyes out and putting her arms around the young man.

Ashley saw an opportunity and took it. She slowly guided the grieving pair to the podium. During the next ten minutes, neither spoke to the audience as the other speakers had, but rather they shared with each other fond memories of Jenny, and the funeral guests listened in on their dialogue, which was constantly punctuated with sobs and sniffles, and few of the listeners remained unmoved.

On any other occasion they could not have had such an exchange. But their hearts were open and their defenses were down, and Brian listened while Mrs. Clark shared the haunting, unbearable quiet of her house after Jenny had gone to the nursing home, and she listened while Brian told of their many

walks together, often just holding each other tightly for a long time in some secret place.

Finally they had both said what they needed to say. Ashley could tell it had been good for both of them. She guided them back to the seats, and a space was made beside Mrs. Clark for Brian. As soon as they sat down they smiled at each other.

Ballet dancers entered and they leaped and pranced around Jenny's casket even as bearers approached and lifted their burden and bore it away into the Tunnel of Ages, an obese lady and a slender boy walking behind, holding hands and still, at times, crying out loud.

Ashley came a few paces behind and smiled, seeing the odd pair walking hand in hand. Then, as she sat by herself in an obscure corner of the Mortuary while the casket was on display for the last time, her own feelings caught up with her again. Liberty and Shawn noticed and surrounded her with their arms while she shook and sniffled and moaned about the guilt she had felt each time she had cut short a visit with Jenny to run off to gymnastics or a class.

The three friends walked together in the final procession. Jenny's grave site was the kind of place she would have liked, tucked away amongst some bushes and trees. The prayers that were said spoke of melodies and harmonies that would rise up to Heaven and be pleasing to God and all the angels, and expressed thanksgiving that Jenny had been able to leave the beautiful gift of her music with those on Earth.

Jenny's mother, Brian, Ashley, Chad, and two of Jenny's closest friends from the Hospice Center tossed in the first pieces of dirt, and doing so caused the tears to flow again. Others came forward and tossed in dirt, or flowers, or letters they had written to Jenny. Many condolences were shared, and those who had not been close to Jenny began to wander back indoors as dinner time approached.

Mrs. Clark stayed by her daughter's grave until the mist turned to rain at about seven o'clock. Ashley knelt quietly beside Brian for another two hours, sometimes praying, sometimes listening for answers to her prayers, sometimes just remembering Jenny and her music.

When she finally arose and prepared to go inside, Brian showed no sign of

being finished with his vigil. All that was known was that he was not there the following morning, nor elsewhere that he could be located.



Three days of stormy weather followed the funeral of Jenny Clark. Most of the members of Lyceum began preparing for the Nuclear Disarmament Conference that was only a few days away, even though thoughts of Jenny and her music lingered for nearly all of them. It was a new experience for Lyceum to host a government-sponsored event that would require nearly every facility on the campus, and at the same time to keep it all top-secret. But the government planning team sang many praises for the level of cooperation they received, and for the high confidentiality standards that were already in place in all of Lyceum's programs.

One hundred members were not preparing for the conference. Instead, they were packing. On the following Saturday, two days before the conference would begin, they would be loading their belongings onto trucks and buses and beginning a journey that would end near Atlanta, Georgia a few days later. A brand new Lyceum campus awaited them, having been under construction for the last year, and they would be its first members. They would have three months to get a tremendous amount of work done before the new campus was opened to the public.

A huge farewell party was scheduled for that Friday evening. Everyone was excited about the opening of Lyceum's second campus, but also nearly everyone would be saying good-bye to someone they were close to. The three friends were spared that trauma: those leaving did not include Sister Heather, Brother Jacob, Jason, Sarah, Karen, or Tabitha.

As a hundred members prepared to transfer to the new campus, a number of non-resident members had decided that this was an excellent time to get more involved in the work of the service organization they had joined. Nine would be helping to offset the loss of members at the Portland campus, and another six would be going directly to Atlanta to augment the start-up effort there.

Shawn had a pleasant reunion with Brother Dancing Raven, the member who had driven him over the Rocky mountains during his flight from South Carolina. Dancing Raven revealed to Shawn that Sister Linda, the Utah

corporate executive, was handing in her resignations and would be arriving on campus in a few weeks.

The arrivals and impending departures had a different effect on both Liberty and Ashley. Together they sat down at a computer terminal and gazed thoughtfully at the list of campuses that would be opening during the next few years, and the language requirements of each. This year, Atlanta. Next year, Basel, requiring German, French, or Italian. Ashley grinned. The year after that, Moscow, needing Russian. Liberty smiled. After that, Beijing...



Even with all the preparations that were going on, not everyone was busy. Charleen was on a long walk alone that day, glad for a break in the weather, and nervous about all the federal Marshals and other agents lurking about in the buildings. She had wandered deep into the African Garden when she saw him. He was sitting by himself on a boulder that was off the path and almost completely hidden by bushes. She smiled to herself, gathered her courage, and approached.

The boulder was big enough for several people, so she climbed on and sat down, as if she too had heavy things to ponder. Actually she did: how to talk to a boy she liked very much but who was still sad about the death of a girl he had loved.

"I won't tell anyone else about this rock," she said.

"Thanks," he said without lifting his chin from his hands.

"I don't want to bother you. I'd just like to be near if you'd like someone near."

For several minutes he didn't speak, but just kept gazing off into the woods.

"I guess you want to be alone right now, so I'll go..."

He looked directly at her for the first time since she had sat down. Even though it would be long before he quit thinking about Jenny, his three days of reflection had gone a long way toward clearing his thoughts. He saw before him a pretty young cowgirl who was his age and who had recently been accepted as a resident member of Lyceum.

"Um... wait. I guess I could use some company. I've been alone since the funeral..."

Charleen smiled and settled herself back onto the rock. She knew she would have to be patient and understanding. That was okay. She was willing.



On Sunday afternoon, the day before the conference was scheduled to begin, the weather was dry and even slightly sunny. Liberty spent two hours making some serious progress at getting her garden presentable, and then gathered her tools into a bucket and headed back toward the Residential Lobby. She was surprised to come around a corner and discover her friend Ashley sitting in the dirt pulling weeds.

“Hi, Ashes. I didn’t know you were on the grounds team...?”

“I’m not. This dumpy-looking patch of ground is mine now... to somehow make a garden out of.”

Liberty set her bucket down and perched on a nearby log. “I thought you were going to wait for summer to start your garden.”

“I was. Then... things happened. You know. All of a sudden I desperately needed to make something grow, instead of everyone around me getting hurt or dying.”

“Oh, Ashes! You can’t carry around a bunch of guilt because of either Karen or Jenny! Neither one was your fault in any way. Karen would have done what she did even if you had never come to Lyceum, and Jenny would have died in Rapid City if it wasn’t for you, with nothing to leave behind but a few tunes in the fading memories of a few nurse’s aides.”

Ashley looked at the moving clouds for a moment. “You’re right. I know all those things, but I don’t feel them yet. Maybe gardening will help.”

“Yeah. Out of all that dirt that looks dead, things will start growing very soon, starting with that witch grass you’re pulling if you don’t get the roots out better than that!”

Ashley cracked a slight grin. “How do I get the roots out?”

“Fork up the ground before you start pulling.”

“Thanks. But right now I’d better clean up and head for my kitchen shift.”

“And I have a security briefing tonight. Want to walk back together?”

“Yeah. Hey Liberty? Thanks... for being there at the funeral and everything. I would have been in the pits without you and Shawn.”

“Hey! The three of us joined together, and we’re going to stick together,

right?”

“Right!” Ashley said, smiling.

The two girls headed along the walkway toward home, bumping each other as they went, then putting their arms around each other, glad for their friendship, glad they both now had gardens, and each glad that the other showed no signs of dying of cancer, or getting shot by a sniper, or anything else terrible. They felt safe at Lyceum, and believed the evils of the world that hurt or killed other people could not touch them.



Chapter 6: An Unwelcome Scare

They filtered into Lyceum slowly, inconspicuously, beginning Sunday afternoon and evening, continuing all through the wee hours of Monday morning, the last rolling in minutes before the opening ceremonies.

They came in unmarked cars and vans from every direction, some through Portland International Airport, some via the small airport at Eugene, many through Seattle-Tacoma International, and even a few through Vancouver, British Columbia or Boise, Idaho. No airport in the region noticed any significant increase in its usual volume of passengers for that time of year.

State Department agents were at all of the effected airports and along all the approaches to Lyceum, but they were in plain clothes and unmarked cars, and neither the regular airport security people nor the local residents noticed anything unusual. Low profile was the name of the game, and so Lyceum's helicopters were not used.

They came from twenty-seven different countries around the world, including all of the nations who had even partial nuclear weapons capabilities, several countries where, on land leased to other nations, such weapons were stationed, a few who manufactured missile delivery systems that were used for nuclear weapons, and even two who had been invited because they faced traditional enemies who possessed The Bomb.

They were cabinet-level ministers and other high ranking officials who were empowered to make many minor decisions themselves, and who could slip away from their respective capital cities without public attention. And they all brought with them the means to use Lyceum's SatLink channels to send scrambled messages and receive coded instructions from their kings,

presidents, or central committees.

From the moment they stepped out of their vehicles at Lyceum, they all wore photo I.D. badges, as did all of the federal agents on the scene, all of the United Nations diplomats in attendance, every Lyceum member who ventured out of the residence halls, and the few others who were allowed on campus during the four-day conference. The two teachers from Montana had smiled when informed of the requirement. Their young students were exempted, but were not allowed to enter the conference centers.

Those badges allowed the security teams to trace the movements of every person at the conference, and to know immediately if anyone was wandering around without a badge. Jason and Claire were asked to make extra sure that none of the large animals got out of their pens and pastures, as they would be quickly spotted by the campus-wide infra-red scanners and descended upon by federal agents and Lyceum security people. They had checked and double checked all of the animal fences and gates during the preceding weekend.



Senator Buchanan arrived early Monday morning and had breakfast with his daughter. He insisted on being issued a badge that would not allow him to enter the conference center. He was willing to talk to anyone, quietly, unofficially, but did not want anyone to think he was present in order to influence the outcome of the conference.

Even though the event was being sponsored by the United States, there was a considerable United Nations presence. One of the purposes of the conference was to air any concerns that had not been resolved during the years of diplomatic work that had preceded. Those concerns would be carefully listened to by the U.N. diplomats. They knew that last minute concessions would have to be made on a host of secondary issues, such as timetables and inspection protocols. They also knew that the core provision of the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty, by its very nature, was not subject to compromise.



The opening ceremonies took place in the Ecumenical Temple at ten o'clock. Liberty was checking badges as people entered, while hidden sensors looked for weapons and an armed federal agent stood nearby. She greeted

Ashley with a smile when she came through, but the thirteen-year-old was unable to stop and talk as the minister from New Zealand was still exchanging words with the statesman from Zaire, and neither spoke the other's language.

The opening speeches were limited to five minutes each, and many noble things were said about the major step the human race was about to take along the road from a world riddled with the fear of nuclear war to a world free of nuclear weapons. Even though everyone had been asked to keep their initial remarks completely positive, few nations avoided the temptation to at least hint at their remaining concerns. Only one very young island nation, which was attending the conference because of the Chinese submarine base it hosted, began to clumsily enumerate its grievances. The guilty minister soon realized that everyone was clearing their throats and no one was listening. He got the message.

Lyceum served up a lavish buffet for the first lunch of the conference, with foods from around the world. Liberty found herself on a team charged with making sure that no one tampered with any of the food. Each serving pan was lidded and sealed in the kitchen, watched at all times on its way to the conference center, and finally unsealed by Liberty only when the member who would be serving was in position with spoon or spatula in hand. She noticed Ashley eating with two handsome U.N. diplomats, and felt a moment of envy, but reminded herself that her Russian was getting stronger all the time, and she too would someday be in the interpreting pool during conferences such as this.

It was while she was imagining herself as a Russian interpreter for important diplomats that she saw the first potential security breach. No sealed pans of food were arriving and she had been just gazing across the room, not looking at anything in particular. The Lyceum member who was attending the hot beverage cart had her head in a drawer looking for something. A man was taking the top off the hot water urn. A red flag went up in Liberty's mind.

She suppressed the nasty name that popped into her consciousness, a name better suited for use on the back streets of Philadelphia, and breathed once before deciding what to do. "Sister Lynette, how is your hot water supply?" she called across to the other.

The member looked up and assertively, but politely, determined for herself that she was indeed out of hot water, and that the man had been attempting to confirm the fact. Liberty watched his responses carefully even as she listened to his and Sister Lynette's words. A few moments later she was convinced that he was genuinely only seeking something in which to steep his tea bag. But when he turned around, she noticed that he was one of the agents from the Department of State. He should have known better.

During the afternoon, the statesmen and their aides got down to business. Conference Center Two had been divided into as many small rooms as possible, each of which hosted one of the attendant nations, a United Nations diplomat, and a Lyceum moderator. The current text of the Treaty was displayed on view screens in the lobby, with different words and phrases in different colors, depending on the number and severity of the concerns relating to those sections.

For part of the afternoon, Liberty was on security duty in the lobby of the conference center. She sat in a chair where she could see most of the lobby and tried to relax. She had been feeling, ever since Sister Nancy's death, as if her life was rushing along much too quickly. She craved the ability to slow down, savor the good times, hold onto the special moments and not let them go.

Sometimes, in recent weeks, she had succeeded in making precious experiences last longer. She was discovering ways to prolong her love making with Jason. She had found that she liked to set her alarm clock for half an hour or more before she had to get up, making time to lay in bed and ponder her dreams, remember the previous day, and wonder what lay in store for that new day. And she was beginning to enjoy using part of her flight simulator time to go back to an earlier lesson and see how effortlessly she could complete it.

As she sat in that comfortable lounge seat gazing at the conference center lobby, she willed her mind and body to slow down, relax, take life easy, a moment at a time, slower and slower. Her breath slowed, and she coaxed it even slower by breathing deeper. Then, muscle by muscle, she let every part of her body relax and melt into the chair. After she had done this for a few minutes, she realized her heartbeat was slowing also. Thump.. thump..

thump... thump... thump.... thump.... thump.... She could feel it slowing, even though she knew she had no direct control over it.

Liberty had kept her eyes open, knowing that she still had an important job to do, but she hadn't been paying much attention to the lobby for the last several minutes as it had been completely empty. Suddenly diplomats and aides started bursting out of doors and scurrying around like busy ants, looking at the view screens, picking up printed materials, using the restrooms, going in and out of the telecommunications booths. For a moment she was confused, and reached for her pager, as everyone seemed to be running, like an old movie being replayed too fast. But she stopped herself, just before pressing the emergency call key, realizing that she must have relaxed herself too well, and everyone else appeared to be running in comparison to her languid state.

She concentrated on the scene before her, and felt better when she saw that everyone in the lobby was wearing their badges and was doing only appropriate things, even though they still appeared to be running, scurrying.

Then something hit her, a feeling so startling it was almost like a physical attack. That contact made her bristle, and every muscle in her body immediately tensed itself, and her heart and breath instantly began to race.

Her perception of the people in the lobby snapped back to normal, and they no longer seemed to be running, but just walking as she knew they must have been doing all along. None of them were doing anything threatening. Liberty felt confused, and could feel herself shaking. Then she realized that she couldn't see the entire lobby. She carefully, fearfully, turned her head to the left to see what could have possibly caused the mental assault she had experienced. Her mind was racing, and she fully expected to turn and find a gun pointed at her, a finger on its trigger, a bullet ending her life, all before she could even begin to get a hand to her pager.

Instead she saw one of the European foreign ministers looking at some papers, an aide gazing into an aquarium, and a federal agent nonchalantly leaning against a wall, none of them even looking at her, and no gun or other weapon in sight. She stared at them for a moment, and then turned her head back to the lobby, not wanting to arouse anyone's suspicions.

The thought of leaving, running and hiding, sprang into her mind, but she

remembered that she was on duty. So for the next twenty minutes she stayed in her seat and forced herself to breathe, slowly and deeply, and she pondered the experience she had just lived through, and her fear slowly subsided. Another member of her security team arrived to take her place, and she almost ran to the Healing Arts Clinic to get some help understanding what had happened.



Sister Karola, the late middle-aged doctor whom Liberty liked the most, listened to her entire story and took some vital signs.

"...none of them were even looking at me, but I *know* I felt something very threatening, something very dangerous."

"It sounds like you placed yourself in a sort of hypnotic trance," the doctor said, "and that trance may have caused you to remember something dangerous from the past... or it may have made you hypersensitive to something in the present. Perhaps it is time we got some help from someone who knows more about this sort of thing..." She pressed some keys on the small computer on her desk.

"This is Rachael," a voice said.

"This is Sister Karola. Are you busy, Sister Rachael?"

"Just painting."

"Could you come down to the Clinic for a moment? I need an opinion on something. And bring Sister Sarah with you if she is available."

Liberty snickered to herself, remembering the ups and downs of her relationship with Sarah.

"She's helping with the school children, but I think I can pry her away for a few minutes."

"Thanks so much, Sister Rachael."

For the next ten minutes, Sister Karola examined Liberty more thoroughly, and massaged some tight muscles she found in her patient's neck, muscles, she explained, that were still reacting to the fear of the earlier situation. Just as Liberty was really starting to relax, Rachael and Sarah entered.

Liberty told her entire story again, and the doctor added her assessment of Liberty's physical and emotional condition.

"Interesting!" Rachael said. "When you felt the contact, were you in the

process of remembering anything from the past?”

“No. I was just watching the people in the lobby.”

“Well, if it isn’t an organic problem, and it didn’t come from your own memory, and I have a strong hunch it didn’t, than either someone out there is being very telepathically pushy, or you’re telepathically sensitive. Maybe both.”

“Me?”

“She’s sensitive,” Sarah said. “I’ve known it for a long time.”

“*Have* you?” Rachael said with raised eyebrows.

“I didn’t want to say anything until she discovered it for herself,” Sarah said in her own defense. “And I didn’t want to do anything to ruin our friendship.”

“You mean... I’m sort of like you guys?” Liberty said with a mixture of pride and confusion.

“You might be only sensitive... only able to receive,” Rachael said. “Or you may be fully telepathic, but the ability just didn’t manifest until this point in your life.”

Liberty looked at Sarah, and suddenly felt a bond with that powerful nine-year-old mind that she had at first detested, and more recently, with encouragement from her friends, only mistrusted. Now all of those negative, suspicious feelings fell away, and she felt a sisterhood with Sarah, and Rachael as well, that even transcended their shared Lyceum membership.

“I *have* been going through lots of emotional changes recently,” Liberty said in response to Rachael’s statement.

With a wave of her hand, Rachael changed the course of the conversation. “We can explore this possibility at our leisure once the disarmament conference is over. In the meantime, Sarah and I have some work to do. Do you need anyone to cover what you were doing, Sarah?”

“No. I was just tagging along, holding up charts or pictures sometimes.”

“Liberty, you should stick to whatever you had scheduled. Sarah and I are going over to the conference center to see if we can pick up anything.”

“I’m on the poison control team again at dinner. It’s a banquet this time.”

“Call if you have that experience again, or anything similar.”

“You can count on it!” Liberty said with a smile.

As Rachael and Sarah left, Sarah glanced back and caught Liberty's eye, and they both flashed each other grins. Then Liberty relaxed into the comfortable chair as she felt Sister Karola's strong fingers begin to knead her neck muscles again.



By noon on the second day of the conference, Rachael and Sarah had been mingling with the conference attendees for many hours, both during structured conference sessions and during meals and evening recreational activities. They were both convinced there was something telepathic going on that they didn't like, but were unable to pin down its exact nature or location. It seemed to come and go, and change position mysteriously.

It was Shawn who was finally able to shed some light on the problem. He and Sarah were eating lunch together, and he was listening to her describe her feelings and impressions, as he often did when she was upset about something. He began to ask questions.

"Is there anyone who's been around every time you've felt something?"

"I don't know! There are always lots of people around."

"Okay, close your eyes again and picture conference room two twelve, the one with the clipper ship painting on the wall."

Sarah closed her eyes and remembered. "Okay."

"Who is there that was also in the lobby a half hour before?"

Sarah concentrated. "That short little aide from the Chinese delegation... the plump U.N. diplomat with the double chin... and Liberty. She was on security in the lobby, and then helping with a projector in two twelve."

"Okay, now go back to the corner of the Main Lobby where you felt something last night. Can you picture it?"

"Yeah."

"Who's there?"

"The whole delegation from Israel... the Russian defense minister, Yuri... I forget his other name. And Liberty, helping one of the Israel people change the battery in his decoder."

"Liberty again?"

"Well, she *has* been very busy," Sarah said in Liberty's defense.

"Have there been *any* times you felt something telepathic going on when

Liberty wasn't around?"

Sarah thought. For a long time. Then she spoke, slowly and reluctantly. "Um... no."

Shawn put his arm around Sarah and gave her a reassuring squeeze. He could tell she was upset by what she had just said. She looked at him with a half-smile.

"Let's see what Rachael thinks," he said, pulling his pager off his belt and pressing its tiny keys.

"This is Rachael."

"Are you busy?" Shawn asked.

"Just staring at a plan of the campus, trying to make some sense out of our ghost."

"May I ask you a question?"

"Shoot," the voice said through his pager.

"Was Liberty nearby every time you sensed something unusual?"

There was a long silence. Shawn and Sarah both waited, almost holding their breaths.

"Yes."

"Sarah says the same thing."

"Meet me in the Main Lobby in one minute," Rachael said.

The two young people took ten seconds to clean their plates, another ten to put their dishes in a bus tub, and thirty seconds to dash to the Main Lobby. They arrived ten seconds early.



After the three of them passed through the security log-in station at the beginning of the corridor to Conference Center One, Rachael described what they needed to do.

"Sarah, you and I need to get near Liberty for awhile. There are some historical cases of telepaths who have been completely overwhelmed by their abilities, and have totally lost control. It always seems to happen when they discover their talents later in life, as Liberty has, instead of in childhood. Shawn, I want you nearby but out of sight. This could get ugly, and Sarah and I could have our hands full keeping her under control. If that happens, you'll need to coordinate the non-mental aspects of the situation."

Shawn swallowed. They were approaching the conference center. He had once had strong feelings for Liberty, and on some level he always would. And even though he had been hurt when she chose a different lover, their bond of friendship was strong.

They entered the conference center lobby and greeted Brother Fred.

“Shawn, please wait here and brief Fred. Liberty is in the banquet room. We’re going in.”

Shawn stepped with Brother Fred into the little conference center office so they couldn’t be overheard by the diplomats and aides who were milling about. Rachael and Sarah took deep breaths, placed nonchalant smiles on their faces, and entered the banquet room.

Liberty was there, checking the food pans that arrived for the proper seals and watching for other security breaches. They greeted her and inquired about unusual events, and in guarded terms she indicated that she had felt something about an hour before in the corridor between the two conference centers.

That matches my last feeling, Sarah silently shared with Rachael.

Rachael thanked Liberty, and even though they both had eaten, Rachael and Sarah pretended they hadn’t, and forced themselves to slowly consume another meal, talking all the while about funny little things that had occurred at Lyceum during the last year or two.

The two telepaths eventually were able to finish their second lunch. They had sensed nothing. They spoke about their most recent art finds for a few minutes, and then wandered over to the dessert table. Sarah felt like she was waddling, and hoped it didn’t show. They selected the least-filling desserts they could find and went back to their table, which was not far from the place where Liberty checked the incoming pans of food.

Another ten minutes passed, everyone had been served, and the room was already thinning out. Suddenly, at a moment when they were least expecting it, the telepaths both felt a mental push so strong that it made them jerk their heads in the direction from which it had come. Rachael could tell it had come from near the entrance door, and had not been aimed directly at them, but off to the side of the room where the serving tables were... and where Liberty was. What they saw was a group of five people entering the room together: a

cabinet member of a European state, two aides, a U.N. diplomat, and a State Department agent. Rachael concentrated on the group, but could not determine from which person the push had originated. As much as she wanted to solve the mystery, she turned her head toward Liberty.

The fifteen-year-old had just been the target, again, of a strong and nasty telepathic push. She too was looking at the five people who had just entered the room, but on her face was written anguish and fear.

Rachael realized her mistake. She had been thinking that the pushes were coming from Liberty, that her talent was emerging so fast that she was losing control of it. Now she realized that Liberty had all along been the target. One of the five people who just entered the room had been methodically attacking Liberty telepathically. And then it occurred to her that Liberty was the daughter of a U.S. senator, one who had been very vocal in his support of the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty.

Rachael knew that Liberty would need comforting very soon, and had to be removed from security duty at the conference. But they needed to know which one of the five had initiated the push. She turned back to look at the group again, only to discover that three of them had slipped back into the lobby and were nowhere in sight. The cabinet member and the U.N. diplomat were still present, but the telepathic attack was definitely past. She had no way to determine if it had been one of them, or one of the three who had left.

Damn! Rachael exclaimed so that only Sarah could hear her.

Liberty was trying to compose herself, but moisture was in her eyes.

Have Fred replace Liberty, and get Shawn and meet us in the conference center office.

Sarah nodded and headed for the door.

Rachael went to Liberty, took her hand and said, "Come on. This place is not safe for you."

Liberty came completely willingly, and she managed to hold herself together until they were in the office and Shawn had his arms around her. Then she shook and talked rapidly for the next half hour, feeling very glad she had friends who were able to figure out what was happening and who were willing to protect her.



For the remainder of the conference, Liberty kept to the residence halls, in Jason's arms, or talking with her father, or doing quiet but fun things with Shawn and Ashley. Rachael and Sarah mingled with the conference guests to try to gather any clue they could about the identity of the attacker. But with the preferred bait removed, no other telepathic attacks were made, and Lyceum was not willing to use the bait again.

That situation, however, did give them confirmation of one suspected fact: Liberty, and only Liberty, had been the target.

On Thursday afternoon the conference concluded with short speeches by each of the statesmen. None of them had gotten everything they wanted in the negotiation process, and they had realized, with Lyceum's help, that every special consideration they demanded caused at least two other countries some kind of worry, and those worries would in turn lead to more demands for special considerations.

At that point in time, the text of the treaty, which had received one hundred and forty-one wording changes during the conference, was in a shape that was very close to acceptable to the cabinet ministers of all twenty-seven nations in attendance. Now the document would go back to the United Nations where it would be checked for consistency with existing international law, and then to the governments of all the nations of the world for consideration.

It was a step in a very long process, and Lyceum was happy to have been able to help. The President of the United States announced that evening that a high-level conference at a secret location had succeeded in hammering out a document of great promise. By then the delegations had already begun filtering away from Lyceum, through a half dozen regional airports, to the international transportation hubs of Los Angeles, Seattle, and New York, and eventually back to their homes.

The newly refined text of the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty was transmitted back to United Nations headquarters that same day, where analysts and lawyers began to scrutinize it in preparation for presentation to the General Assembly and to the world.



Senator Buchanan decided to take a well deserved vacation. He knew his

main task was still ahead of him. He knew the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty still had to be ratified by Congress, and that powerful segments of the American political system would be throwing all their weight into an effort to defeat it. But for a couple of weeks, there was little he could do, and Congress was not in session.

He and Liberty conferred, and as she had accumulated more than two weeks of vacation credit in her seven months at Lyceum, they decided it was a very good time to get to know each other better. This time, for the first time, it would be as father and daughter who both had their own successful lives, their own challenging work, their own important tasks to perform.

With the help of Lyceum, they were soon driving along the Oregon coast in a car that could not be traced to either the name Buchanan or to Lyceum. They were seen at restaurants, museums, aquariums, cheese factories, and often just walking along the beach, but they dressed casually and were not recognized.

On the day they crossed into Washington state, Liberty decided she wanted to tell her father about her newly discovered telepathic abilities, but she didn't work up the courage until they were on the ferry watching the glaciated inlets of southwestern British Columbia pass slowly by. She spoke about it softly, not wanting anyone to overhear, as they both leaned on the ship's rail and gazed at the dark green fir trees that cloaked the mountains.

"I always knew you would be coming up with things to surprise me for the rest of my life," he said with a smile. "We'd have more time to talk about it if we went all the way to Alaska..."

"I'd love to, but Shawn's going on an important mission soon and I promised to help with it, and my sixteenth birthday is coming up."

"Oh, yes! Sweet sixteen! You know, I have trouble sometimes remembering just how young you are."

"I guess I've been through a lot, haven't I, Dad?"

"You... could say that. And I don't suppose your life is going to get dull any time soon with a pilot's license coming up, fluency in Russian not far off, all that computer work of yours, and now this telepathy stuff."

Liberty chuckled. "And don't forget, Dad, I can even ride horses now!"



Chapter 7: A Burden of Guilt

WWN — The fledgling nation of East Ukraine was finally able to elect its first civilian government last week after nearly a year of military rule, civil unrest, and hyper-inflation. This largely agricultural country of seventeen million inhabitants is in the process of establishing its first capital in the city of Khar'kov. The United Nations reports that efforts have been underway for the last ten months to provide technical and diplomatic assistance to the young nation.

Ashley smiled as she tucked the news clipping back into the envelope. It was postmarked from New York City, but the return address simply said, 'Brother T.' Her mind drifted back to the bus trip that had nearly ended in disaster in a small town in Washington, breakfast with her U.N. contact in a fancy hotel, and finally spending her first night with her beloved after his dance competition. She sighed, not knowing when she would be able to see him again.

She looked into her mailbox to see if there was anything else for her, and found a postcard from Julie. It was, as usual, a virtual reality hologram. As she changed its angle of view, dancers changed into butterflies, which in turn changed into spaceships. She grinned, and looked forward to writing back to Julie, and Brother Timoteo... and sending something special to Tim.

"Is this morning still okay for our meeting?" Sister Heather asked, entering the room and looking into her own mailbox.

“Oh, yes,” Ashley said.

The older member looked through her mail. “Where shall we go?”

“Um... how about by the fireplace. Hardly anyone’s in the Main Lobby.”

“Okay, as long as you don’t have anything too personal to talk about.”

“Not really,” Ashley said as they exited the office together. “Maybe just some ideas about getting to New Orleans to see Tim.”

“You haven’t seen him in two and a half months, have you?”

“No. I miss him. Especially now that I have a little free time with... you know... Jenny gone.”

They sat down near the crackling fire. No one else was in that section of the lobby. Some gentle piano music was playing over the sound system.

“You have some vacation time saved up, you know.”

“Yeah, but I don’t dare use it until after the National Championships. I’ve lost enough training time already.”

“Maybe he can come to the Championships...?”

“Maybe. I’ll ask, and he’ll have to talk to his mom. But he thinks she only let him come here to see me because she thought we’d be supervised like at a Catholic boarding school or something.”

“I see,” Sister Heather said, suppressing her own lingering feelings of discomfort about the idea of premarital sex. She knew they were promised to each other and both wore half of a mizpah coin in token of that promise, and she also knew that their unofficial promise had about as much chance of lasting as most modern marriages. She felt she had no grounds for negative judgment. “But it probably won’t hurt to invite him.”

“I’m going to,” Ashley said, flashing her mentor a grin.

“The only other thing I can think of is to plan some special time together this summer, after the Championships.”

Ashley nodded thoughtfully.

Sister Heather smiled. “Ready to move on?”

“Yeah. Let me see. I think I’ve almost got my focus back. My beam routine is getting really good. Karen comes to the gym in her wheelchair once or twice a week, and I make her coach me. We tried to talk her into being our team captain, you know, going to all our meets and everything, but she said she had to start thinking about what she was going to do with her life, so we

had to settle for honorary team captain. We're getting a plaque made with her picture and a list of all her ribbons and medals engraved on it, and it'll go in the display case in the Rec Center. Faelan's working hard with me on my bar routine, and I'm trying some new vaults. I hope one of them feels right for me, so I can use it at the Championships."

"It sounds like everything is coming together. Are you excited about being able to compete at the Nationals?"

"Totally. It'll probably be my only chance. I think I'm entering a growth spurt, so I'll have to work really hard."

"Can you spare the next couple of weekends?"

"I guess. What for?"

"There are some seminars on international diplomacy, in French, that you've been invited to attend." She handed Ashley the program synopsis.

Even though the synopsis was completely in French, Ashley read through it, only having to ask her mentor to translate two words. "But it's in Paris!"

"That's right. There's a non-stop flight from Portland to Paris every night at ten o'clock. We've already made you a reservation for this Friday, and we'll confirm and pay for your tickets as soon as you decide. And you can either come back Sunday night, or stay the week and train in a gym just a few blocks from our Paris office."

"Wow! Paris... Does the office there have a big apartment, like in New York?"

"Yes. And if you stayed the week, the whole thing would be much more relaxed, you'd get to see more of the city, and you wouldn't have to deal with jet lag so many times."

Ashley was grinning. Paris. International diplomacy seminars, in French. Training in a Paris gym. Seeing the Lyceum planning office and meeting more members. Wandering around Paris during the evenings. "Can I decide after I talk to Coach Faelan?"

"Sure. I don't know enough about gymnastics to know if it would interfere with your training for the Championships. You and your coach will have to make that decision."

"Thanks. I'll decide by dinner tonight, I promise."

"That'll leave plenty of time to make all the arrangements. What else do

we need to talk about?”

“I really like Depth History now. I’ve learned where about a million places in the world are... or were... places I’d never heard of before. I like Literature too. *Catcher In The Rye* did nothing for me, but *Lord Of The Flies* really made me think.”

“I had a very similar reaction to those two books,” Sister Heather said.

Then Ashley was silent for a long moment. But she soon had clear in her mind what she wanted to say.

“I have something important to ask you.”

“Well... I’m all ears.”

“You’ve been... the only completely reliable thing in my life, ever since I applied to Lyceum. I mean, my parents aren’t *unreliable*, but they don’t really understand me completely either. You do. You know all my dreams and you help me with them, and you never treat me like a little kid.”

“There is very little about you that needs to be treated like a little kid. And that started long before you came to Lyceum. You didn’t get that gold medal in South Dakota by playing with dolls!”

Ashley blushed. “Thanks. I was scared the first time I told you about me and Tim, you know...”

“I remember that day. I was scared too.”

“I realized a few days ago that I’ve never actually asked you to be my mentor. But I wouldn’t want anyone else. I really feel for Liberty, having to look for a new one. That would be hard. I hope you’ll be my mentor for a long, long time.”

Sister Heather was smiling. “I will be very, very honored to be your mentor for as long as I can, Sister Ashley!”

“But I have to put a condition on it...”

“A condition?”

“Yeah. You have to let me help you in your garden, or whatever you need to have done, for the same amount of time that you take being my mentor!”

The older lady didn’t respond. She just held her young charge close. She couldn’t remember a happier moment in many years.



It was late one evening in the latter half of March and a thick mist was

blowing through the trees and collecting on all the windows. Shawn stood by himself in a small project room and gazed down at the model of the indoor civic arena in Birmingham, Alabama where his father would be preaching in less than two weeks. The member who had constructed the model had asked Shawn to choose the colors for the people, and now the bleachers were filled with thousands of little green figures who represented the general audience, sixty-eight blue figures who were the Lyceum members, and about eighty red figures, the Reverend Tommy Mitchell and his staff. A dot of white paint on two of the heads differentiated both Shawn and his father from the others.

Shawn was feeling very alone. He had been preparing himself mentally for several weeks for the task he had to do, a task that in a sense only he, all alone, could perform, even though there would be Lyceum members very near. And now, just as the planning was being finalized and the last possible problems were being worked out, Liberty was in Canada with her father, and Ashley was in France. He knew they would be back in plenty of time to prepare for the mission to Birmingham, but their absence at that moment was making him feel more alone than ever before.

He looked down at the model again, and then closed his eyes, picturing his strong, stern father saying some of the lines that he and the others on the planning team had imagined he might say. And he could clearly see two very different reactions in himself.

He could see himself standing there confidently, serenely, as a Lyceum member should, with just the right things coming from his mouth to disarm his father and make the entire audience see the truth.

And he could see himself shaking, frozen with fear, even crying as his father spoke, and not being able to utter a single coherent word.

Then he felt someone touch him, both physically and mentally, and he turned to find Sarah putting her arms around him and laying her head on his chest. "Hi, Shawn."

He gently put his arms around his young friend. "Hi, Sarah. Sometimes I think I can do it, and sometimes..."

He said no more, but closed his eyes and clenched his teeth and let his whole body just shiver for a moment.

"What you're going to do is the bravest thing I've ever seen anyone do," she

said.

"I just wish I knew if it was going to work or not," he whispered, still shaking a little.

"It is. I know it is."

"Thanks."

"Did Rachael tell you that me and her are swapping places? She decided that the people on the far side of the arena are going to be harder to deal with, so she's going to be over there, and I'll be closer to you!"

"Good. I'll need all of you, especially when it's over."

"Hey, Brother Henry was making apple pies a little while ago. They should be coming out of the oven soon. I'll treat you to a slice!"

He smiled. "That would be fun. I'm not doing any good staring at this model anymore."

Sarah knew that Shawn's other friends were off campus and could sense his feeling of isolation. She stayed with him until he began yawning at about 11:30. Then he said good night and wandered off to bed.

But no sleep called to her. Instead, the misty spring rain beckoned to her as it lurked in and out of the trees and caused the outdoor lights to cast large, diffuse pools of illumination. Her nine-year-old metabolism did not fear the cold and wet. She changed into a bathing suit, told the night security team where she was going and several other places she might go, and headed outside.

After discovering new realms of mist-enshrouded magic in several of the lighted gardens, she wandered into Sister Patricia's Vesuvian Garden and slipped into its hot pool, where she thought long about Shawn and his unenviable task, and the part in it she would play. She realized that he would be openly defying his father on that mission, and she knew that doing so must be very hard for someone as religious as Shawn, if her readings in the Bible to date were any indication. He would need plenty of love and companionship after the mission, and she planned to be one of those giving him that companionship.



The month of April arrived at Lyceum with a mixture of rain and clear skies, and the usual assortment of practical jokes and gags. On the third day

of the new month, the three friends were all back from their recent travels and were spending extra time together in anticipation of Shawn's upcoming ordeal.

Ashley and Liberty were in the Dining Hall early for lunch distributing platters and pitchers to the long tables. Shawn entered with the main crowd, coming directly from the Marty Jelwen team meeting. Everyone found seats, and then noticed that Brother Chad was at the place where the day's announcer always sat, and that he was already standing and had an excited look on his face. They fell silent. Everyone could see that a cardboard box sat on the table near him.

"Sisters and Brothers, exactly one hour ago, at noon Mountain Time, Sister Laura in Rapid City, South Dakota, at the King's Table restaurant, handed the first published copy of *Back To The Stars* to Jenny Clark's mother."

The entire room erupted into a loud applause, with cheers and whistles. Ashley was clapping vigorously, and people in the restaurant section of the Dining Hall were craning their necks to try to determine what the excitement was all about.

When the joyful noise had finally died down, he went on.

"I have been given the honor of bestowing several more copies of the leather-bound version of the published work upon persons who are all present today. Brother Brian?"

Again applause filled the hall. Brian stood, but hesitated and looked down at Charleen who was seated beside him. She squeezed his hand, said something that no one else could hear, and smiled. Finally, with an effort, he walked toward the announcer's place.

"As you all know," Brother Chad said as Brian stood before him and the room was again silent, "we do not have the privilege of the composer's autograph. The limited-edition does, however, contain a nice hologram of Jenny. She is smiling, and if you look closely, you can see that someone is holding her hand. I am happy to now give the second published copy to the young man who made that smile possible. Thank you, Brother Brian, thank you from all of us, and most of all, thank you from Jenny."

Brian received the leather-bound case and held it to his chest. He cried freely as he walked back to his seat, and Charleen surrounded him with her

arms as soon as he sat down.

“Sister Ashley?” the announcer called.

Ashley knew she had not been close to Jenny in the same way that Brian had been. But she did not feel any jealousy — she knew that only a boy could have done what Brian did to make Jenny happy in the final months of her life. She saw her role more in terms of fulfilling a mission for Lyceum. She had met Jenny while on a Lyceum assignment, and what she had done seemed the only right thing to do.

But she was also aware, as she approached Brother Chad, that her friendship with Jenny had caused her to re-evaluate the priorities in her life for the first time. She knew now that she couldn’t continue training for gymnastics forever. Someday she would have to make room in her life for other things.

“Ashley, your willingness to befriend a little girl in a nursing home, your acute perception, and I must add, your natural diplomatic skills, all combined to make it possible for Jenny to come to Lyceum, to compose her music, and to see it performed. Thank you, from all of us, and thank you from Jenny.”

Everyone cheered as Ashley returned to her seat.

Several other people went up for their copies of the limited-edition, and as they did, Ashley pushed back her plate and opened the beautiful leather case. Shawn and Liberty looked in with her.

On the left side were two small books held in place by a golden elastic cord. The first one told Jenny’s story, from birth and her disease, to the nursing home and her early efforts to play the voices on her penny whistle, to Ashley’s arrival and the recorder, and finally coming to Lyceum, composing, and at the end of her life attending the first performance of her music. The second book contained the complete musical score for *Back To The Stars*.

On the right side of the case was the disk itself, containing two versions of the music: one performed entirely by the computer, and the other a mixture of computer synthesized instruments and human musicians, as had been used at the first performance. And below the disk was the hologram of Jenny, happy and smiling. Ashley remembered the situation. She had helped Jenny put on the dress she was wearing. It was at Christmas, Jenny’s last Christmas, and yes, she could see Brian’s hand on the very edge of the image.

Ashley turned and hugged Shawn, then turned the other way and hugged Liberty, and then lovingly closed the leather case and placed it in her gym bag which was hanging on the back of her chair. She knew Jenny was up in Heaven, where she wanted to be, probably composing beautiful music that Earth would never hear. Ashley looked forward to someday seeing her again and hearing what she had composed.

But right now she, Ashley Riddle, had a mortal life to lead, and the bowl of steamed vegetables with herbs and butter sauce that had stopped not far away looked like it had her name on it.



On Saturday, April 6th, sixty-eight Lyceum members gathered in Birmingham, Alabama at a small conference center that had been rented for the weekend. It had been selected for its proximity to the civic arena where the Reverend Tommy Mitchell would be holding his revival the following day. Twenty-three members had left Portland by train two days earlier. Thirty-one had come by bus from the new, not yet open, campus in Atlanta, Georgia. The rest, including Shawn, his friends, and the technical team, had flown out that day.

After tossing their packs, carry-bags, and small suitcases onto the bunk beds in the dormitories, they all pitched in to assemble a tasty meal of soup and sandwiches.

“Okay, Brothers and Sisters, here’s the plan for the day,” Sister Larissa said before sinking her teeth into her sandwich. “Right after lunch, the tech team, the psych team, and the security team will each meet. Brother Sam here,” she said, indicating the blond, late middle-aged man on her right, “went into the arena this morning on the pretense of doing an electrical inspection, as he works for Birmingham Power and Light. He has some new information about the set-up that will effect our plans in minor ways. At about three o’clock, each team will have a chance to address the entire group, and there will be plenty of time for questions and answers. Dinner at about six, the evening is free for anyone who wants to explore the city, go shopping, or whatever, and the technical team plans to go in at about midnight.”

There was little talking while they ate their lunch. Everyone was excited, and everyone was a little nervous. There were many things that could go

wrong with the plan, and they knew it. But they were all comforted by the fact that they would not be in any personal danger. All save one.



Brother Sam had overheard that the audience would be ushered to certain sections of the indoor arena as they arrived. That would cause new problems for the security and technical teams, but compensating plans were quickly devised.

The non-resident member had also learned that the reverend's security was tighter than they had expected. At least a hundred security guards would be in the arena, and the ones that were not on the reverend's personal staff were being hired from a local firm with a reputation for toughness. That information caused Sister Rachael to abandon her plan of being on the far side of the arena. She decided to be where the action was in case Lyceum's physical security measures were not enough.

By dinner time, they felt they had adapted to the new situation and spirits were higher. Shawn knew he needed to forget about the whole business for awhile, so he suggested to his friends that they walk into town and he would treat them to desserts of some kind. They accepted, on the condition that they be the ones to do the treating. He acquiesced. They invited Rachael, but she needed to confer with the other team leaders on some issues that were still bothering her. She did, however, arrange for two other adults to accompany them, considering that Shawn's father might also be in the city.

As soon as the young people had left, Rachael made herself a cup of tea and sat down with Brother Fred.

"I think we've been assuming a half-way rational response on the part of Reverend Mitchell. I think that assumption is naive, and I want to talk to you about some contingency plans in case of certain events that might arise, events that wouldn't be our fault, but nonetheless could endanger large numbers of people..."



When the four youth returned to the conference center at about eleven o'clock, they were all carrying bags in which their souvenirs of Birmingham were contained. Many members were already in bed, sleeping or reading, and so they were careful to be quiet, just as they were used to doing in the

residence halls at Lyceum. The technical team was at one large table, eating a light meal and pouring over their schematics and checking their carry-boxes of equipment.

Shawn hung around, wondering if there was anything else he could do. More people were quietly saying good night, most of them patting Shawn on the shoulder, or giving him thumbs-up or other signs of encouragement. He couldn't figure out why.

"You look like a lost sheep!" Sister Larissa said, coming up to him in the middle of the common room.

"This is all my fault! How can everybody be so nice to me?" he said in a troubled voice.

"Brother Shawn, you are NOT your father, never were, and never will be. God gave us all free will. Your fellow members are all smart enough to know these things. Are you smart enough to keep your feeling about your father from interfering with the work we have to do tomorrow, work that is necessary to save Lyceum from massive political and possibly legal problems, and expenses, in the future?"

Sister Larissa was being stern with him. Others who overheard the exchange knew why. If Shawn was unable to carry out his part of the mission, they needed to know now, before sixty-eight members and thousands of dollars worth of equipment were in place and at risk.

Shawn breathed deeply and tried to think. *Please be with me, Jesus.* After a few moments, he started to feel clearer about what was going on. "You're right. If my father wasn't attacking Lyceum, some other evangelist would be someday. I'm sorry. I'm just not used to being treated so... so much like an adult."

Larissa smiled. "You should have seen what your friend Sarah went through when she became a member at six, and then found out that she had all the rights and most of the responsibilities of any other member!"

The thought was sobering. The mission leader patted him on the back and went over to join the technical team. After a moment, Shawn wandered into the kitchen, got a cup of tea, and then went to spend some time in a quiet, unused room that he had noticed earlier. He felt the need, more intensely than at any point since leaving home, to spend some serious time in prayer.



Ashley woke when the technical team returned at about four in the morning. She peered out from under her covers just long enough to listen to their whispered voices and glimpse their faces. Sarah was quietly greeting them and offering them snacks. As soon as Ashley was sure that all had gone well, she rolled over and fell back asleep.



Everyone, with the exception of the members of the technical team, were awake by seven. Liberty took a quick shower and then dressed in the clothes she had brought for the occasion, clothes that were both nice looking and would allow her to run like the wind in an emergency. Everyone gathered in the common room for worship and reflection, after which Sister Larissa stood to make some announcements.

She looked around the room and then turned nearly white. “Oh, God, where’s Shawn?”

“I’ll show you!” Sarah said, hopping up and going to a window.

Sister Larissa and about half of those present followed. Sarah pointed through the window, and everyone could see that there was a small church about half a block away, where services were obviously just starting.

“Thanks, Sarah,” the mission leader said.

Shawn returned just as the group, still with the exception of the technicians, were sitting down to a hearty breakfast of orange juice, sweet rolls, hash browns, eggs, and ham. Sarah bounced out of her chair, grabbed his hand, and dragged him to the table. He couldn’t help but smile.

“Is everything on track for today’s mission?” Larissa asked from her seat not far away.

“Yes,” Shawn said. “everything is in good shape! As long as the technical team was successful...?”

“It was,” Larissa said.

Shawn smiled again. “I’ve never been so scared in my life, but I’ve figured out that this is what it’s like doing God’s will. Fear is just fear. If I’m doing His will, everything will turn out okay.”

“That’s the spirit!” a member sitting nearby said. “And we’re all scared too, and we’re all trying to discern His will, just like you are. None of us

would be here if we didn't think that His will for us today was to stand behind you."

"Thank you, all of you!" Shawn said, and then attacked his breakfast with abandon.



As noon approached, the members of the technical team were awake and getting ready. Bowls of fruit and platters of crackers and cheeses were set out for people to munch on as they made last minute preparations. The tickets to the event were passed out, Shawn was given a thin device to put in his shirt pocket, and at half past noon they filed out of the building and began their quarter-mile walk to the arena.

At several points along the way they split into smaller and smaller groups, each taking a slightly different route, so that by the time they arrived they were in groups of no more than four, groups which seemed, to any observer, to not know each other.

Shawn and the security team who needed to sit near him made sure they were in line together. The psych team spread itself out in the line as other people arrived. Sarah stayed with the leader of the technical team so that instant communication would be possible with Rachael, who went in with Brother Fred and Sister Larissa.

The civic arena, as they knew, held about ten thousand people, and it was expected to be filled to capacity by the event. As Shawn entered, he could see the television cameras set up in the media alcoves, and he could see the platform from which his father would preach. It was decorated tastefully with draperies, candles, flowers, and a large cross.

The seats very near the speaker's platform were already filled, and the ushers were now guiding the entering stream of people to a section about a quarter of the way around the arena. That seemed good to Shawn. He felt the need for some distance from his father. But he was still worried about the level at which he would be seated. He didn't want to be higher up than his father, but he knew that being seated too low could also cause problems. And he also knew that there was no way he and his security team could change their places in line now without causing suspicion.

Providence placed him at about the same level as his father's speaking

platform, and just above an aisle. After sitting down, he looked around him. The members near him were well arrayed, and would be able to stop anything but a military S.W.A.T. team from getting to him. He breathed a sigh of relief and tried to relax into his seat.

It took another twenty-five minutes for everyone to get seated. A choir began to sing, and the technical team leader began using a small hand-held device to adjust a piece of equipment that was hidden amongst the other fixtures on the ceiling. Those seated around him assumed he was just reviewing his appointment schedule or playing a computer game while waiting for the revival to begin.

Rachael was looking around with her keen eyes and at the same time trying to sense any telepathic activity in the stadium that might complicate their plans. She saw several policemen, but knew they would stay near the doors and wouldn't get involved unless there was violence. To her delight, with the exception of Sarah's clear voice and Liberty's untrained abilities, she only sensed one significant telepathic presence, and it was coming from a child and was completely incoherent. She wished she could meet the child, but knew it probably wouldn't be possible given the more urgent task at hand. Sarah informed her that the equipment was ready.

The Reverend Tommy Mitchell walked out onto his platform and began to speak.

"Brothers and Sisters in Christ, let us pray."

Pride welled up inside Shawn. His father, a famous and respected evangelist, was masterfully leading the opening prayer, just as Shawn had heard him do so many times before. Ten thousand people had their heads bowed, and unknown tens of thousands, maybe millions more in their homes watching the event on television. It was an excellent prayer, and Shawn was deeply moved.

During the next twenty minutes, the Reverend Mitchell spoke eloquently on theological topics that were perpetually popular. Shawn was transfixed, and completely forgot why he was there. He was even beginning to feel like he was back in his father's good graces. What, he tried to remember, were the names of those seminaries his father had wanted him to choose amongst?

But Sister Rachael, and other Lyceum members, were observing a carefully

planned progression of topics, starting with the nature of Good, moving on to the nature of Evil, shifting to specific categories of Evil, and even now beginning to focus on specific Evils. He had only one more step to make, the small leap to talking about evil places, and it would begin. They listened intently.

He made the last transition slowly, carefully, and hardly anyone in the arena was aware that he wasn't still talking about wonderful, spiritual things. And when he finally did take that last step (the step that every Lyceum member secretly hoped he wouldn't make at all and they could go home without a confrontation), he did it in a most subtle and clever manner, starting with an evil place that everyone could agree on.

"Brothers and Sisters, we live in a free society. I wouldn't want it any other way. But occasionally places of such obvious evil spring up that no one can deny that they must not be tolerated. The factories in Asia where chemical and biological weapons are still being created are evil places!"

Murmurs of agreement ran through the arena.

"The abortion clinics around the world sponsored by the United Nations where babies are killed every minute of every day!"

The agreement of voices was not at first universal, but a majority quickly became a consensus.

"And, Brothers and Sisters in Christ, a place called Lyceum near Portland, Oregon, and another opening soon in nearby Atlanta, where adults and even children sleeplessly do the Devil's work by building shrines and chapels to false gods, by worshipping science instead of God, and by supporting the United Nations in its immoral activities!"

Shawn saw red. His heart was pounding and he sat glaring at his father. He had expected to take this moment calmly, but now he bristled. His father was talking about Ashley and Liberty, Brother Jacob and Sister Rachael. And he was talking about Sarah. Shawn jumped to his feet.

Two buttons were pressed, and suddenly Shawn was lit up in a warm shaft of light. He could hear himself breathing, and knew that his microphone had been activated. He spoke, slowly and seriously, and ten thousand people and six television cameras turned to look at him.

"You are speaking ill of my home, Father. I'd like to answer those

charges.”

The Reverend Tommy Mitchell turned his head slowly and mechanically, and looked at Shawn with an icy stare. Everyone expected him to say something. After all, his son was talking to him, and he was obviously an adult and was speaking rationally. But all the reverend did was to make some hand signals to an assistant behind him.

The assistant spoke into his headset, and at the electrical control room a technician could be seen rushing through a door and working fervently at a control panel behind a glass window. Several lights went off and on, but the spotlight remained on Shawn. The technician stepped back out of the control room and spread his arms in impotence.

The reverend made more hand signals, this time in front of him where everyone could see them, and security guards began to converge on Shawn’s position from several directions. The Lyceum security team waited until they were almost upon him, and then suddenly stood and blocked their approach. The team had been selected so that at least two very large, very muscular-looking men stood on each aisle that could be used to get near Shawn, with others completing the circle. They locked arms and the reverend’s men were forced to either stop short or start a fight. Without further instructions, they chose to stop.

“Let him talk!” someone yelled from across the arena.

“He’s your son!” someone else said.

“We want to hear him!” a third voice said.

Shawn’s heart was pounding. He had recognized at least two of the voices who had just spoken, and knew the psych team had begun its work, but he was breathing too fast to smile or laugh. Words started coming to his mind.

“I was moved by the first part of your sermon, Father. It was excellent. Why did you have to stoop to fabricating lies about a place that did nothing but feed you and give you shelter in a storm, and pull your car out of the mud, all in the middle of the night?”

The reverend’s men stepped back a little, as they had received no further instructions, and the Lyceum security team took a lower profile so that Shawn could be seen better.

“Talk to us, Reverend!” someone yelled.

“Yeah!” several other voices added, too many to have all been the members of the psych team.

“Then why didn’t you stay in that evil place,” the preacher finally burst out, “where the children stay awake all night enacting pagan rituals?”

Shawn could feel every hair on his body standing on end, every muscle tightening. But words kept coming so he spoke them, loudly and clearly.

“The one young person at Lyceum who has insomnia is my DEAR FRIEND! The pagan ritual she was enacting is called BALLET DANCING! If she hadn’t been awake to welcome us, my mother might have DIED of exposure that night!”

A definite rumble of amazement ran through the audience.

But Shawn wasn’t finished. Words were still coming to him. “But she doesn’t dance at night very often, Father. Usually she can be found feeding the GOLDFISH!”

The entire arena was talking now, and some laughter could be clearly heard.

The reverend’s amplified voice cut through and silenced the talking. “You will never be welcome in our church again! You are not worthy to call yourself a Christian!”

Shawn’s neck was getting tight and his face was burning hot, but he knew what he had to say.

“On the other hand, you, Father, will always be welcome at Lyceum. And ALL of you out there are welcome. I invite you to come and see for yourselves. Walk in our gardens, worship in our Temple, our chapels and shrines, stay in our Lodge, play in our gym, pool, or playground. Look for the Devil anywhere you want. Yes, you will find people with different skin colors. You will find people who speak different languages. You will even find people who have different names for God. But you will not find the Devil unless you bring him with you!”

The entire audience was talking now. The Reverend Tommy Mitchell would tolerate no more. He made a sweeping motion and then a chopping sign to the electrical technician, who turned and entered the control room. But he didn’t stop at the control panel. He went all the way to the back of the room, found the largest lever, and with two hands, pulled it.



Within a second the huge arena was pitch dark. Two seconds after that people began screaming. Rachael had predicted that this might happen, and she and Sarah went to work even as the technical team leader pressed another button on his hand-held computer. They knew that in very few seconds people would be trampling each other.

A light appeared near the ceiling in the center of the room. It grew brighter and brighter and moved downward, but was not uncomfortable to look at. It caught everyone's attention. At the same time those who had panicked were suddenly, inexplicably, comforted and most of them fell silent. The growing globe of light was a pale green, and it cast a very gentle, soothing illumination over the entire audience. People who seconds before could think of nothing but bolting for the exits were sitting back down, looking up at the mysterious light, and yawning.

Most of the Lyceum members realized that their mission was over. The team leaders confirmed this by being the first ones to walk casually down the aisles and toward the exits. The other members followed. Liberty took Shawn's hand and together they descended toward the exit. Rachael and Sarah came last, still exerting an effort to comfort the unnerved.

But no one could tell where the group of Lyceum members ended, for their exodus had been as the planting of a seed. Directly behind them came others from the audience, and seeing those leave made still others decide that they didn't want to stay any longer. Some assumed that the revival was over, and others wanted nothing more to do with the Reverend Tommy Mitchell. For many different reasons, the arena was emptying.

The Lyceum teams immediately split up into twos, threes, and fours and took different routes back to the little conference center. About a block from the arena, Liberty and Ashley could tell that Shawn was starting to tremble. They stopped and hugged him tightly.

"You were great!" Ashley said.

"Your words were perfect!" Liberty added.

"I don't feel very great. I feel sick. I'm glad I don't have much in my stomach."

"Hey! You should take gymnastics! That's exactly how I feel at a meet!"

Ashley said.

“Really?” Shawn had always before assumed that gymnastics competition was nothing but fun.

“And you should take helicopter pilot training!” Liberty said. “I know that feeling every time I’m up for a training flight!”

“You’re kidding!”

“Translating for high-level diplomats can also do it!” Ashley added.

“Or being a Control Technician for an important event!”

“Or coaching Beginning Gymnastics when you’re dead tired!”

“Or being the target of a telepathic attack!”

“Or climbing to the top of the Garden of Endor!”

“Or riding a horse!”

Ashley burst out laughing at Liberty’s last statement. Shawn was smiling. And he was starting to feel better. He was starting to realize that he was in the company of friends who knew all about stressful moments and gut-wrenching tasks. He was feeling a new bond with them, a new comradeship.

“Thanks, guys. I just... can’t quite believe I did it! There was no way I could rehearse what I was going to say. I just said what was in my heart. You know, it wouldn’t have made me very mad if he had just said bad things about me. But when he started talking about Lyceum and Sarah, I was ready to chew nails!”

“I could tell!” Ashley said.

“You looked like a beet!” Liberty said.

Shawn chuckled. “I guess we should get walking.”

“Yeah!” Ashley said. “I have a hunch there’s a party waiting for us!”

Hand in hand the three continued on toward the conference center.



But when they arrived, no party atmosphere was evident. Rachael took Shawn by the hand without saying anything and led him into one of the dormitories. There was Sarah, in a bunk, under the covers, shaking like a leaf. Sister Jennifer was kneeling beside her, holding a bowl of fruit, trying to get her to eat something.

Shawn knelt and looked at his friend. Her eyes were distant and troubled. He wasn’t sure what to do for a moment, but then he started realizing how

much he cared about her, how close to her he had become.

“Sarah?”

“It was terrible!” she said in little more than a whisper, more to herself than to anyone else. “They were panicking. They were afraid of the dark. I couldn’t believe that so many people would hurt each other just because he had turned out the lights!”

Shawn knew that ‘he’ referred to his father. He had already figured out that Rachael had been partly responsible for stopping the panic that had been imminent. Sarah must have been helping too.

“She was exposed to more raw human fear than ever before,” Rachael said. “She has never had to use her abilities with so many people, so quickly, and in such a stressful situation.”

“Sarah, it’s Shawn. Can you hear me?”

Her glazed eyes searched for the source of the familiar voice and tried to focus. After several moments, with difficulty, she looked at Shawn and a slight smile appeared on her face. “Hi, Shawn. I feel so tired.”

“I feel drained too. I’m going to sleep like a log tonight.”

“I think... I think I’d like to do that too.”

“But you need to eat something first, okay?”

“Okay.”

“At least a piece of fruit,” Rachael said.

“Apple, orange, or banana?” Shawn offered.

“Banana.”

Jennifer half-peeled a large banana and handed it to Sarah, and she ate it slowly while lying there in bed.

“Would you like me to help you fall asleep?” Rachael asked.

“Sure. Will you be here when I wake up, Shawn?”

“Yes, unless *I’m* still asleep!” he said with a grin.

Sarah giggled a little, then pulled the blankets close around her. Shawn leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead.

“Good night,” he said. “And thank you. I couldn’t have done it without all of you there.”

“Good night...” Sarah said in a groggy voice and let her heavy eyelids close as she gave in to her mentor’s unseen telepathic influence.



Sister Larissa came in about half an hour later. She had remained in the civic arena until the very end of the revival. She reported that after the Lyceum members had filed out, the reverend had been unable to gather his thoughts for quite a while, and about nine-tenths of the audience had departed. Eventually the regular lights had come back on, and he had managed to give a simple sermon to the ‘faithful’ who had remained, carefully avoiding the issues of his son and Lyceum.

The celebration they had planned did happen, but it was kept very quiet out of respect for Sarah. Impressions were shared, appreciations given, and hopes for the future expressed while platters of tasty finger-foods were passed around. Shawn was tired and thoughtful, but he felt that a great burden had just been lifted from his shoulders.

He had only one worry, and he spent considerable time that evening in personal prayer about that concern. He knew that if Sarah had taken any permanent harm he would have just exchanged one burden of guilt for another, and he hoped with all his mind and all his heart that that hadn’t happened.



Chapter 8: Birthdays and Hopes for the Future

As soon as Ashley returned to Lyceum on Monday afternoon, the day after Reverend Mitchell's revival meeting in Birmingham, she was surprised to find three letters in her mailbox that had been forwarded from her parents' house in Rapid City. The first one was from the Wyoming Special Olympics Committee.

March 29th

Dear Ms. Ashley Riddle,

One of the members of our Committee had the honor of witnessing the South Dakota Special Olympics last year, at which you were serving as the primary facilitator. We understand that you did this as a volunteer after spending several weeks helping to train the participants in Rapid City, South Dakota. We are further informed that your facilitation caused a significant increase in spectator attendance and in donations received.

We would like to invite you to be the Mistress of Ceremonies at this year's Wyoming Special Olympics, to be held in Cheyenne on May 11th and 12th. Although our budget is tight, we are prepared to reimburse you for all of your travel expenses, motel, meals, etc. Our detailed program schedule is enclosed.

Please let us know as soon as possible if you will be able to help us make this year's Special Olympics in our state more interesting to more people.

Sincerely,

Ralph S. Pearson, chairman

Ashley finished reading the letter and looked up at a calendar. She could see that the event was on a weekend, two weeks before the Nationals. She would have to talk to Coach Faelan about it. Maybe if she found a gym in Cheyenne where she could practice on Saturday evening...

The next letter was from the North Dakota Special Olympics Committee. It said essentially the same thing as the first letter, but the event was in Bismarck, North Dakota on May 25th and 26th. Ashley knew that she would be in San Francisco competing at the National Championships that weekend. She would have to call them and tell them that she couldn't come.

The third letter was from the South Dakota Special Olympics Committee. It began by emphasizing that the *new* chairperson of the committee was excited about the possibility that Ashley might be able to help them again, and that she would have *as much freedom as she wanted* in her facilitation. It was happening in Pierre on June 1st and 2nd. That was the weekend after the Nationals, and Ashley was excited about the idea, as it would not conflict with her training at all.

Then she remembered Chad, who would probably be there again, and swallowed hard. After taking a few deep breaths, she read the rest of the letter. South Dakota was also willing to pay travel, motel, and meal expenses. That would mean she wouldn't have to stay in the dorms. She would only see Chad during the event itself. She could handle that.

Feeling better, her mind went into high gear. She could fly to Rapid City, and then drive with her parents to Pierre, and they could see the Special Olympics and spend the evening with her. The whole thing was starting to sound like fun, and she didn't even need to talk to her coach about the South Dakota invitation.

She looked over toward the travel desk and saw that Sister Judy was there, so she walked over and waited for the blond lady to finish what she was doing.

"Hi, Ashley!"

"Hi, Judy. What would it cost to fly me to Cheyenne, Wyoming and back?"

"When?"

"May 11th and 12th."

Sister Judy queried her computer for a few moments. "That's a weekend

— about four hundred and fifty.”

“And Rapid City, South Dakota on June 1st and 2nd?”

“About five hundred. Vacation?”

“More like a mission, but I think I’ll get to spend some time with my parents.”

“Fantastic! Are you excited about the National Championships?”

“I am totally jazzed! All I have to do is decide which vault I’m doing and work some bugs out of my bar routine.”

“Good luck!”

“Thank you!”



Later that day, Ashley received Coach Faelan’s blessing to attend the Wyoming Special Olympics, IF she could arrange for supervised gym time on Saturday evening. She called the chairman of the committee and told him the situation. He cringed when he heard the cost of her travel plans. He had been expecting to pay for a bus ticket from Rapid City. He cringed again when he learned of her need for gym time. But he promised to see what he could do, and by that evening he had called back with confirmation, knowing that without Ashley, the Wyoming Special Olympics would again have a very small audience and few donations.

Then she called her parents, and they were thrilled by the idea of them all driving to Pierre together for the weekend. They had not been there the year before, as they had not realized that she would play such a prominent role, and were glad for the opportunity to rectify their mistake.

The following day the new South Dakota chairwoman also cringed at the cost of getting Ashley there from Oregon, but knew well the alternative. Only the North Dakota chairman was left wishing that he could have spent some amount of money to make Ashley available.



All during the week following the Birmingham mission, Liberty had inquired about Sarah whenever she saw Shawn or Sister Rachael. She had always been told the same thing: Sarah was resting, maybe even sleeping. Liberty was beginning to worry.

On Thursday, Liberty passed out invitations to her sixteenth birthday

party the following evening. She specified on the invitations that it was going to be a very quiet party, and that anyone who was looking for a wild time had to look elsewhere. She reinforced the message by announcing that the main activity would be the sampling of gourmet cheeses, olives, pickles, and other delicacies. Still seeing no sign of Sarah, Liberty left an invitation in her mailbox.

The guests began to gather shortly before seven o'clock on Friday evening. Candles flickered on every shelf and table in Liberty's apartment, the slight aroma of incense lingered, and some soothing Native American flute and drum music was playing quietly. Serving trays were already filled with a variety of sweet, savory, and sour delights, and a small tub of ice contained an assortment of sparkling beverages.

Most of the young people at Lyceum had been invited, and all of the adults whom Liberty had grown close to. Jason arrived first, followed closely by Brian and Charleen, Brother Ben the swim coach, Tabitha, Karen in her wheelchair, and Sister Erica and Brother John Michael from Liberty's piloting classes. Shawn, Sister Rachael, and Matthew, whom Liberty knew from swim class, arrived soon after. Brenda and Brother Fred came in about a half hour later. Liberty already knew that Joan was not on campus, and that Ashley had classes until eight o'clock. As each person arrived, another mysterious bag or colorful box was added to the stack that had begun with the large parcel postmarked from Washington, D.C.

Between sampling little cubes of cheeses or pickled onions, Liberty told them all how lucky she felt to be there with them. Even though they all knew the story, she related how she almost ruined her chances of getting into Lyceum by the cruel words she had used with Sarah, and how she had worked her tail off to atone for those words. Bottles were opened and trays passed around, and Liberty told of more of her life before Lyceum than she had ever shared before in such a large group. She was almost a little surprised when no one seemed bothered by any of it.

A few minutes after eight Ashley slipped in, added her gift to the stack, and found a place to sit. Liberty looked around at the friends who were sitting on her bed, in chairs, or on pillows on the floor.

"You don't look happy. Something's wrong, isn't it, Liberty?" Sister Erica

said.

"Yeah," Liberty said, letting her head hang down like a lost puppy. "I'm worried about Sarah."

Shawn flashed Ashley a grin, but Liberty didn't notice.

"If it wasn't for Sarah, I wouldn't have become a member. She's made me grow more than anyone else ever has. And I learned not long ago that... she and I have something in common... something that she's a lot better at than I am."

Just then there was a knock at the door.

Tabitha opened the door, and there stood Sarah in her bath robe holding a small box. "Sorry I'm late. I had some finishing touches to do, and then I had to find a box for it," Sarah said, moving to place the gift on the pile.

But Liberty jumped up and intercepted her, embracing both the nine-year-old and the box at the same time. "I am *really* glad you're okay!"

Rachael grinned.

"I think I'm okay," Sarah said. "But I've slept more this week than in the whole last year!"

Everyone chuckled and smiled.

"I'd like to open your gift first," Liberty said.

"It's just a little something I put together..."

Liberty opened the little gift box and pulled out the small, intricately tooled leather purse. "Oh, Sarah, it is *really* beautiful!"

Everyone in the room started clapping, and Sarah turned red. When the applause died down, she said, "I made it this week... when I wasn't asleep, that is."

Liberty smiled. "Thank you. I've been needing a little purse like this to keep valuables in when I go into town. Can you come with me someday soon?"

Sarah looked up at Liberty. She had always liked the older girl very much. Now, with Liberty's evaluation week far in the past, and their common telepathic gift known to both of them, maybe they could really be friends.

"I think so. Sister Karola wants to see me again tomorrow. Mostly what happened was that I got a big shock. I didn't know that most people have so much fear inside them ready to come out. It wasn't even very dark in that

arena, but they were panicking like wounded animals. It's so different here at Lyceum. I'm really glad I'm here. But now I know that I have to learn more about how most people think. I'm going to start the Psychology class soon."

Sarah squeezed in between Rachael and Shawn on a large cushion, and the party continued with more gifts being opened, trays passed around, and stories told. Finally, at about nine o'clock, only the large box from Liberty's father remained. She opened it slowly as everyone watched.

Noises of amazement filled the room as Liberty pulled the English riding saddle out of the wrapping paper. Tears almost came to her eyes as she held it and saw that the words *Sister Liberty* were tooled into the leather on one side. It was not lost on anyone present that the wording implied her father's complete acceptance of her Lyceum membership.

"This is... my lucky day for things made out of leather!" she said. "And for having the best friends any sixteen-year-old girl could ever want!" She glanced all around the room, but especially at Jason, and Shawn, and Ashley, and last of all Sarah. And she remembered, just for a moment, her old friends back in Philadelphia. Comparing the two in her mind, she decided she had done the right thing by coming to Lyceum.

"Okay, enough of this silly gift-giving. We have a reservation for a hot pool!"

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY!" everyone said together, and then started to extract themselves from the places they had been sitting, several of them grabbing the food trays to bring along.

But Liberty put her finger to her lips. "Shhhhh! This was supposed to be a quiet party!"



Shawn woke one morning in mid-April to find the sun out and everyone talking about their gardens. Even Ashley and Liberty, he knew, had started theirs. Although he had faithfully attended Gardening class ever since becoming a member, the idea of working outside was still uncomfortable to him — it was just not something he had done very often in his nearly nineteen years of life.

But he knew that every Lyceum member was expected to have a small garden to care for, or a part of a large one. And he was intensely aware that

he, or more precisely his father, had recently caused Lyceum considerable trouble, and much time and money had been spent in dealing with that trouble, all without any negative attitudes being expressed toward himself from anyone. He was both amazed and grateful. And he felt he owed Lyceum very much.

So when he and Brother Jacob got together that day for their regular mentorship time, Shawn announced his intention to begin a garden, either a difficult one, or two of them. Jacob guessed his purpose but said nothing. They sat down together at a computer and accessed the campus plans that showed the status of all of Lyceum's gardens, shrines, and other outdoor areas.

"There are quite a few free gardens right now because of the folks who transferred to Atlanta," Brother Jacob said. "You should be able to find just what you want."

Shawn studied the legend. "Let me see... blue means a completely pre-planned garden, green means you can do whatever you want, and blue-green means partially pre-planned."

"Right. And the yellow dots with numbers in them are shrines."

"Hey, that would be fun. I'd like to have one with a shrine. I wonder if any are free..."

"Use your function keys to request a search... good, now mark *unassigned* and *shrine*... okay, there's your list, only one. Press *locate*, and there it is, over near the Temple. Press *info*, and we'll find out all about it..."

Both of them silently looked at the information screen that appeared.

"Wow! A Celtic Christianity shrine, modeled after a site in Ireland!" Shawn exclaimed. "It's a partially pre-planned garden, with a hedge at the front, a tree at the back, and I can do anything I want with the rest, as long as it harmonizes with the shrine." Shawn didn't say so, but he was also aware that it wasn't far from Sarah's garden. In fact, it was so near that they could almost talk to each other while out working. Or maybe they could go back and forth, helping each other with their work. He smiled at the thought.

"Why don't we go look at it?" Jacob suggested.

They walked together to the garden that Shawn was considering adopting. He loved it as soon as he saw it. The low hedge along the walkway contained

an opening, and through that opening irregular paving stones wandered back to the Celtic shrine that was overshadowed by the large maple tree. The shrine contained a small stone altar, a tall Celtic cross, and several standing stones. On the altar were silk flowers and other trinkets that people had left. A sturdy donation box was at the side of the altar, rain-proof and planted deep in the ground on a steel post. Small lamps lined the walkway, and inconspicuous spotlights were trained upon the altar and the cross.

Shawn wandered around, feeling the stones of the shrine, touching the tall maple, walking along the hedge, and looking at all the plantings, some of which were already getting weedy or overgrown. Brother Jacob waited near the shrine. Shawn noticed that only one other garden lay between this one and Sarah's, and the low hedge continued through them all. Finally he returned to where his mentor was standing.

"I have a book about early Celtic Christianity you can borrow if you'd like," Jacob said.

"I'd like that. I wouldn't feel right taking care of a shrine unless I knew all about it. I want to do it. I want to care for this garden. And if I'm out here working on it, and people ask me questions about the shrine, I want to know the answers."

"Okay! Let's go attach your name to it. It obviously needs a new caretaker. Also, I bet your friend Ashley can give you some information about the Celts. She's becoming a regular history buff."

"I wish I knew where she gets all her energy!" Shawn said.

"Carrots and yogurt?" Jacob suggested, tongue in cheek.

Shawn smiled. He had several times contemplated the possibility of dating Ashley if her relationship with Tim didn't work out. But he had never been sure if he could match her seemingly boundless energy and constant motion. He knew he needed someone who was, at least occasionally, capable of quiet contemplation and worshipful reflection.



With only five weeks to go until the USA National Women's Gymnastics Championships, Ashley's training entered its final phase. She added large blocks of gym time on Saturdays and Sundays with Sister Shannon, extended her weekday afternoon hours with Brother Faelan, and returned to the gym

after all her other classes were over in the evenings to work with Tabitha under Karen's guidance.

It took some doing, but Ashley managed to talk Karen into promising to go with them to the Championships. Ashley emphasized to her convalescing friend that she had many good coaching skills, and that by going to meets, other gymnasts and coaches would remember her and her Chunichi Cup medal, and maybe think of her when they needed a coach or a judge. Faelan and Shannon both nodded in agreement.

Ashley had finally selected a world-class vault, but knew she was going to have to work hard — or pray for a miracle — to get comfortable with it in time for the Championships. She did pray, but decided that she had better put in the hard work too.

When time came to pack for the Wyoming Special Olympics in early May, Ashley's chosen vault was firming up, and even though she didn't think it would earn her any medals in itself, at least it wouldn't drag down her all-around score too much. Her excitement about the Wyoming trip was increased when she learned that a non-resident member lived near Cheyenne with whom she could spend the weekend. The chairman of the Special Olympics committee was very glad to learn that a motel room wouldn't be necessary, considering the cost of Ashley's air fare.



While Ashley was away for the weekend, Shawn was very busy in his new garden, trimming the hedge, improving the stone walkways, planting flowers around the shrine, and pulling weeds. He and Sarah went back and forth between each other's gardens, borrowing tools or asking for opinions about how one section or another was looking.

He had been reading about the origins of his shrine in Brother Jacob's book, and learned that it came from a time when an older religion, characterized by Druids and other mysterious figures, was giving way to the newly imported Christian faith. He was fascinated by the complexity of the historical period he was studying, even though comparatively little was known about it, and he planned to continue his studies in the library when he finished the book he had borrowed.

That same weekend also brought many visitors to Lyceum, and Shawn

found himself presented with several questions about the shrine. On one occasion he knew the answer, and was able to enjoy a ten-minute discussion about Celtic Christianity with the visitor. On another occasion he had to admit ignorance, but promised to do some research in case the visitor ever returned. But on a third occasion he realized, the moment the question was asked, that the asker had absolutely no interest in an answer. The question was just a thinly disguised judgment about any branch of Christianity that was not, to the asker, the correct branch. Shawn smiled and said he didn't know. And he thought of his father.



Ashley returned late Sunday night, but wasn't able to get together with her friends until Monday night. Over slices of cherry pie in the nearly empty Dining Hall, she told them about the Special Olympics, but the most exciting thing was her discovery that she could do her vault almost perfectly at the gym in Cheyenne. She was already working with her coaches to figure out what was different, and they suspected that she had accidentally set the vaulting horse higher than usual.

As ten o'clock was passing, Liberty excused herself to join Jason for a swim, and Tabitha and Sarah headed outside to play in the moonlight, giggling as they went. Ashley remained, poking at the last few crumbs on her plate. Shawn noticed that she seemed lost in thought, and moved over to sit beside her.

"Hi, Ashes."

"Hi, Shawn," she said in a dispirited voice.

"You look lost."

"Just wondering when I'll get to see Tim again. I keep suggesting ideas, but nothing works out for both of us. I haven't seen him since... Christmas." She let out a little laugh that was more sad than funny.

"I'm sorry..." Shawn said, not knowing what else to say.

"For awhile it was working so well, you know, me being here at Lyceum, him in New Orleans. Now... I don't know what to do."

Shawn's mind couldn't think of any helpful suggestions. But his heart saw an opportunity. "If it doesn't work out, maybe... you'd consider going out with me sometime...?"

Ashley looked at her friend with a mixture of shock and a big grin on her face. “Wow... gosh... but, Shawn...!”

“I know. You’re still promised to Tim. And I’m glad. He’s a very special guy.”

“It’s not that, Shawn. It’s that... how do I say this... it’s pretty obvious that you like someone, and she likes you!”

Shawn’s mouth opened in surprise. Ashley’s statement made his mind reel, and forced him to become aware of what he had been hiding from himself, what he had been assuming was impossible.

Ashley continued. “You and I both need to be patient with the relationships we have. Mine is hard because of distance, and yours is hard for other reasons.” Then she glanced at the clock on the wall. “Oh darn, Karen’s waiting for me in the gym!”

She started to hop out of her seat, but then stopped herself. Her friend had just opened his heart to her, and no one else, except Tim, had ever before done that. A wave of warm feelings for Shawn swept through her, and she realized how much she really did like him. He deserved a response to his offer, and Ashley felt she could honestly give him one that would set his mind at ease. She settled back into her chair.

“Shawn, you are one of my dearest friends, and I like you a whole lot. If things don’t work out with our other relationships, I would be very, very happy — and very honored — to go out with you and become much more than a friend.” She leaned forward, kissed him on the cheek, and dashed for the gym.



For the next week and a half, Ashley focused all her energies on preparing for two events that were occurring at the same time.

As her gymnastics training expanded in preparation for the upcoming National Championships, she had to temporarily set aside her classes and hand her work shifts over to others. Her floor exercise made all her coaches smile with pride, and her uneven parallel bar routine brought the entire gym over to watch, mouths open in wonder. Her balance beam presentation looked like a ten, but they knew it was, of all the events, the one most susceptible to nerves. And finally her vault, with the horse at a height they

never would have imagined she could use, was looking better than ever.

At the same time, she was preparing for Shawn's nineteenth birthday, which she could not personally attend because of the Championships. At nearly midnight of each day, with twelve or more hours of training behind her, she would pull what she was making out of a drawer and work on it until sleep overcame her. And she was becoming more and more comfortable with the thought that if she and Tim couldn't make their long-distance relationship work, she would have to let go of her first love and accept the imperfect situation of giving her heart to another boy.



Chapter 9: A Medal or a Friend

Shawn was dealing with a head full of mixed feelings on Saturday, May 25th, his nineteenth birthday. He had no scheduled work shifts, but tried to keep himself busy helping out here and there, at least when he wasn't watching the Gymnastics Championships on the large screen in the Residential Lobby.

Shortly before noon he saw a girl earn a score of 9.8 on the uneven parallel bars, the same girl who possessed enough love and strength in her heart to practically promise to love him if other things didn't work out for both of them. It was the second best score of the event, only surpassed by a 9.9 from Texas. As he watched, another girl sat quietly beside him, a girl he had been slowly getting to know for more than two years, first in letters, then as a fellow member of Lyceum. Tears of confusion nearly filled his eyes.

The fact that it was his birthday only made it all worse. For years his father had been arranging parties at church for him, and few of the kids who came seemed to want to be there. But now he was an adult, he was no longer living in his parent's house, and he could have any kind of birthday party he wanted, and invite just who he wanted.

A good two dozen people at Lyceum had their gifts for him ready, and were just waiting for some kind of hint from him as to what he wanted to do. The possibilities were many, from an excursion into Portland, to a lively hot pool party, to skating or dancing, to a quiet party like Liberty had hosted. April suggested to Brother Jacob that they just start a party somewhere, stack up

his presents, and invite him. Jacob counseled that they wait a little longer.

At about three o'clock, Shawn watched Ashley earn a 9.7 for her vault, and wondered how she ever worked up the courage to sprint at full speed down the runway, launch herself off the springboard, and hurl herself into the air after contacting the vaulting horse, spinning and twisting, only to land on her feet with nearly perfect poise a second or two later. Her courage was contagious. He went to find his mentor.

By dinner-time Brother Jacob had mobilized all of Shawn's friends, youth and adult, and they were happily at work decorating the social room in Avalon Hall. Liberty and Jason were put in charge of selecting music, and April and Brenda worked together to assemble beverages and snacks.

When Shawn came in with his mentor at seven o'clock, Sarah and Charleen were in their dance tights and leotards having some free-style fun to some lively music. Shawn stood and watched, a smile on his face. He could tell that Sarah was greatly simplifying her dance skills for Charleen's sake, who was just a beginner.

The song ended and Liberty dashed over to Shawn. "May I have the first dance with this handsome nineteen-year-old?"

Before he could answer, Charleen was there too. "And may I have the second dance?"

The music played, Shawn danced with most of the young ladies, and all of the not-so-young ladies. His mood slowly improved, and he enjoyed sipping spritzers and sampling all kinds of chips and dips.

Then people began presenting him with gifts. There were books and clothes, disks and jars of goodies, posters and small tools. And when he thought he had received a gift from everyone, Jacob came forward with one more.

"Didn't you already give me something?"

"This is from Ashley, who apologizes for not being here."

Shawn felt a warm glow fill his heart the moment the gymnast's name was mentioned. He opened the box, to find a beautiful wooden cross inlaid with colored gemstones. As he gazed at it, he recalled a fact that he had totally forgotten: of all the young people at Lyceum other than himself, Ashley was about the most religious. It was true that she didn't talk about it much, but he

had often seen her on her way to the Hall of Shrines or the Temple when no event was scheduled, and he had several times stumbled upon her in odd corners of the campus deep in prayer.

Sarah appeared beside him. "We thought it would look beautiful on the wall in your room. I helped Ashley find the stones, but she did all the work. Do you like it?"

"Yes, very much."

After he spoke those words, he suddenly felt comforted by someone, or something, he couldn't see or understand, and all the confusion seemed to drain from his mind. He looked at the young girl standing beside him. She had beautiful blond hair, she stood with the poise of an experienced dancer, and she would soon be entering adolescence. Shawn had never really been bothered by the scar tissue on the side of her face and neck. She was beautiful to him.

"I haven't yet danced with you. May I?" he asked, extending his hand.

Sarah shrugged and smiled shyly. "I haven't done much dancing... I mean, with boys."

Liberty had put on a slow, melodic song. Several other people were already dancing.

"I'm not very good either," Shawn said.

Sarah took a small step closer to him. He put his arms around her, and then guided as they slowly moved to the music. The new clarity he was experiencing made him feel happier than he could remember feeling in many weeks.

It's obvious that you like someone, and she likes you! Ashley's words echoed in his mind even as the song was ending.

"Thank you very much, Sarah."

"Thank you, Shawn."

Shawn spent the remainder of his birthday party sitting beside the refreshment table pondering all the thoughts and feelings he had had that day. He was looking forward to a good night's sleep to help him sort it all out, but he knew he had one more task to complete.

By the time Shawn turned out the lights and crawled into bed, the cross Ashley and Sarah had made was hanging on the wall above his desk. Its

multi-colored stones gleamed softly in the moonlight glow that entered his window. He thought of Ashley, and of Liberty, and lastly of Sarah as he fell into a restful sleep.



As Ashley ate breakfast on Sunday morning with her coaches and teammates, she knew that her scores from the previous day had put her amongst the top ten competitors, out of one hundred and sixty-two gymnasts, and her two strongest events still lay ahead. She was getting excited.

The scrambled eggs and ham were tasty and she knew she needed some protein, but she also wanted to make sure she got plenty of fruit and yogurt. She was glad that Sister Shannon had an ice chest stocked full of goodies in case she needed something.

During both events on the previous day, the Sports Pavilion had been set up so that four gymnasts could perform at the same time. Ashley had silently dedicated her parallel bar routine to Tim, and her vault to her dear friend Liberty. Her scores had been everything she could have hoped for.

But she knew today would be different. The floor exercises, performed to music, had to be done only one at a time. A different gymnast was scheduled to begin every two minutes, and if they were even seconds late, or the disk they had handed in was not properly cued, they would be disqualified from the event. Even with such tight timing and strict rules, it would take nearly six hours for all of the floor routines to be completed.

Ashley already knew her schedule. The performances began at 9:16, and all of the gymnasts and coaches took the rules very seriously after seeing the 9:22 person disqualified for being late. When your name was called, you had about five seconds to get onto the mat. Period.

Ashley was in the warm-up room by ten o'clock, and Tabitha was also in a leotard to help her with stretching. At Ashley's request, Karen took her through limbering and stretching, warm-up and more stretching. Then Coach Faelan took her through all her difficult tumbling skills and tricky transitions. Shannon was ready with fruit juice and a few peanuts.

As 10:30 passed, Ashley donned earphones so she could listen to her own selected music several times instead of the music of other gymnasts. The 10:36 gymnast was disqualified for a defective disk. Ashley felt for the girl,

who walked off the mat with her chin on her chest, knowing that no power in the universe could bring back her one and only chance at the ribbons and medals.

At 10:40, Ashley listened to her music for the last time. She closed her eyes and imagined herself on that floor, doing all her dance moves and tumbles perfectly. Sister Shannon massaged her legs and back at the same time. At 10:42, Ashley headed for the starting position.

Your strength is in your light touch and your smooth landings, she could hear her coach back in Rapid City saying. The gymnast before her finished, earning a 9.3.

This one is for Karen! she said to herself. The clock changed to 10:44, and Ashley stepped onto the floor and scrunched herself into her starting posture.

The music began, and for the first few notes, Ashley didn't move. Then she burst straight up into the air, somersaulted in place, and landed on her toes already dancing. The audience was stunned and Ashley could hear and feel their excitement. This was what she loved most, making her audience happy, and letting their energy add to her own.

She danced in wider and wider circles, and had completed most of the required tumbling skills before she began the serious part of her routine. It started suddenly with a punch-back at the moment the music entered its rhythmic climax, and continued with three passes across the floor, each more complex than the one before, with single somersaults changing into doubles, aerials becoming twisting aerials, and handsprings changing into back-flip handspring combinations, the whole thing ending with a triple pirouette spin that placed her back in her original posture.

The audience roared, and the judges looked at each other as they all pressed the same key.

"Ashley Riddle... ten," the loudspeaker announced.

Ashley was shaking as she walked back to where her coaches and friends were waiting. Karen was practically bouncing out of her wheelchair. Tabitha embraced her teammate, and Coach Faelan was grinning proudly. Shannon handed Ashley a cup of juice as soon as she was sure the very excited, very happy gymnast wouldn't drop it.



Because of the length of time necessary to get all of the floor exercises completed, there was no official lunch time on Sunday. Everyone simply went to lunch when neither they nor anyone they wanted to watch was scheduled to perform. The Lyceum group walked to a nearby restaurant shortly before noon, and Ashley was able to have one of her favorite foods in the whole world: spinach salad with diced chicken, lightly dressed with low-calorie Italian. She knew it would be well digested and she would be munching on fruit and yogurt before her last event.

When they returned to the Sports Pavilion, Ashley felt the need to do some stretching, so she headed down to the warm-up room. She was almost there when she saw a girl coming toward her who looked familiar. Her mind was cast back more than two years to a slight conflict and an offer of friendship that was never fulfilled.

Both girls stopped and looked at each other.

"Hello, Ashley."

"Hi, Cheryl. I heard you got another medal in South Dakota!"

"Yeah... bronze. You weren't here last year, were you?"

"No. I couldn't find a gym in time that did elite levels."

"Well... looks like you're gonna bump me again."

Ashley looked puzzled.

"You're in third place right now, and I'm in fourth," Cheryl explained.

"But your balance beam is awesome, Cheryl!"

"So's yours."

Ashley felt bad. Cheryl was a really good gymnast. She wished there was some way to help her with her dream of getting a national medal. She remembered seeing her name on the results of last year's Championships, somewhere around 25th place. She felt she had to do something.

"If it will help your chances, I'll step out," Ashley said.

Cheryl looked at her askance, but Ashley didn't flinch. "You'd... actually do that for me?" the taller gymnast said in an incredulous tone.

"Sometimes, in international diplomacy, you gain a lot more by giving in than by being rigid. Maybe if I step out I'll gain a friend."

"International *what*?"

"Diplomacy. I'm working on my Level Two United Nations Clearance."

"I'm working on not flunking eighth grade math!"

"Math is hard for me, too. Do you want me to step out?"

Cheryl looked troubled. After a moment her face softened, and Ashley had a hunch she was seeing the real Cheryl for the first time.

"Um... that wouldn't be fair. I'll still get onto the Olympic Team if I can stay in the top seven."

"It would be really nice to know someone on the Team if I make it too," Ashley said.

"Yeah. Well... if you'll watch my beam routine, maybe say a little prayer for me, I'll do the same for you."

"It's a deal!" Ashley said, grinning.

Cheryl started to walk away, but then stopped. "Maybe... we could be friends, no matter who gets what place...?"

"I'd like that," Ashley said. "What are you doing tonight?"

"I have to get on a train for home at nine."

"Me and my coaches and friends are going out to dinner at about seven. Want to join us? We have a van so we can take you to the train station afterwards."

"Wow. Okay. And maybe you could tell me a little more about... what was it... international diplomacy?"

Ashley smiled and waved as she headed on toward the warm-up room.



This one is for Shawn, Ashley said to herself as she waited for the judges to signal her. They soon did, and she walked forward and looked at the sixteen foot long beam. A deep breath, a side aerial, and she was up.

Most people remembered the floor exercise that had earned Ashley a perfect ten a few hours before, and their eyes were on her, even though three other gymnasts were performing. Word had gotten around, to those who didn't already know, that Ashley had taken a very respectable ribbon at the last Chunichi Cup. As she danced and tumbled on the four-inch wide beam, she was, without realizing it, stepping into the realm of world-class gymnastics. Nothing remained in any of her routines that could be called easy. Every punch-back on the beam, every somersault and aerial completed with perfect form and perfect balance received a response from the audience.

But it was her last run across the beam that was decisive. Double somersaults were common on the dismount. Ashley performed one, but she wasn't yet dismounting. Her feet found the beam again and she launched herself into a double twisting back-flip before landing. The applause made her grin like a clown as she bowed to the judges and the spectators.

"Ashley Riddle, 9.9."

She felt good about it. She knew her routine was too daring to be perfect. She also knew that few other gymnasts were grabbing better than 9.5 for their beam routines. Cheryl had pulled off a 9.7, and someone else had earned a 9.8. Ashley was very content.



At half past five all of the beam routines were done and the apparatus was being cleared from the floor of the pavilion. There was much chatter in the bleachers as everyone tried to guess or figure out who the winners were. Ashley just sat back and relaxed, and hoped that Cheryl's wishes would come true.

The ribbons and prizes began with 20th place. Ashley, Tabitha, Karen, and their coaches clapped for them all. They were the twenty best female gymnasts in the country. They all deserved recognition.

With every passing name that wasn't Cheryl, Ashley was getting more and more excited. She knew for an absolute fact that Cheryl was in the top twenty, even though she didn't remember all of her new friend's scores. When the master of ceremonies got to eighth place, and it wasn't Cheryl, Ashley knew that one of her friend's dreams was coming true. She would definitely be on the Olympic Team. Ashley smiled.

A very happy seventh place went up to get her ribbon. Ashley was starting to bounce up and down. Sixth place wasn't Cheryl either.

"The fifth place goes to Cheryl Adams of South Dakota!"

Ashley clapped and cheered as Cheryl went up for her ribbon and prizes. She looked happy. Ashley knew that every girl there wanted to get the gold medal, but all but one had to settle for less. She hoped her offer of friendship and dinner had helped to make Cheryl happy, even if just a little.

Fourth place went up, and then the bronze medallist, and Ashley clapped for both. She had seen the third place winner's floor exercise and balance

beam routine, and they were both excellent.

“The silver medal goes to Ashley Riddle, here by special invitation!”

Ashley started to clap for the lucky silver medallist, and only a moment later realized that it was herself, and her clapping was replaced by giggles and even a few tears. Coach Faelan almost had to shove her out onto the pavilion floor.

She felt the medal being slipped over her head, and she somehow managed to climb onto the winners’ platform along with the bronze and gold medallists. As soon as the formalities seemed to be over, she ran to find Cheryl.

“I hope you’re still my friend!” Ashley said, facing the fifth place winner.

Cheryl’s face was a mixture of emotions, but the smile was winning. “I’m certainly not going to get anywhere by being a snob, am I? If you had dropped out, I’d still only be fourth. I’m the fifth best gymnast in the country, fair and square, and I’m on the Olympic Team. If that isn’t enough to make me happy, what is?”

Ashley embraced her new friend.

“And besides,” Cheryl said, “I want to learn more about international diplomacy!”

For the next hour, Ashley and the other medallists answered questions from various media representatives and smiled for photographs. Ashley spent as much of that time as possible near her coaches and friends, and many of the photographs that later came out in magazines and newspapers contained both the silver medallist and the fifth place winner standing side by side. When asked who her coaches were, Ashley always listed five people, two back in Rapid City, and three at Lyceum, one of whom smiled from her wheelchair when she heard her name mentioned.



During dinner, Cheryl received an animated description of Lyceum from all three young people, and Brother Faelan explained how Ashley had become involved in international diplomacy. Cheryl’s respect for the younger gymnast soared. By the time they took their new friend to the train station, the three youth had promised to send her pictures and information about Lyceum, and she had vowed to do everything possible to arrange a visit.

Ashley stood with her new friend on the platform as they waited for the

boarding announcement.

“Well, even if we can’t get together sooner, I’ll see you at Olympic Training Camp!” Cheryl said.

“Yeah. But I get in and out of South Dakota pretty often. I’ll try to stop by some time.”

“Okay! I’ll tell my parents that you’re always welcome.”

“Thanks!”

“First boarding call for the California Zephyr to Sacramento, Reno, Salt Lake City, Denver, Omaha, and Chicago,” someone said over a loudspeaker.

“Bye! Keep tumbling!”

“You too!”



Ashley slept deeply that night, and had much to think about on the long drive back to Lyceum the following day. She had experienced what it was like to compete in the National Championships. She was bringing home a silver medal. And, with Cheryl’s help, she had learned some new things about international diplomacy.



Chapter 10: A Window of Opportunity

The middle of the week following the National Championships was a time of pure happiness for Ashley. The sun was shining, the birds were singing, and for the first time, her garden was giving her reasons to think that it might someday look nice. She ran her fingers through the warm soil and realized that she had plenty of time that day to do nothing but play, as she was only planning to spend a couple of hours in the gym to keep herself in shape. It was a little bit of a vacation, and she was already thinking that as soon as the South Dakota Special Olympics were over, she would plan a real vacation to include visits with her parents, Julie, Cheryl, and most importantly, Tim.

Liberty was also in her garden, examining the stones she had collected to form the base for the sculptured fountain that Brother Howard had made. She had been thrilled when he had asked her if she could use it, and now it sat in a wooden crate nearby waiting to be installed. Brother Phil was going to help her with the plumbing, and she wanted to make a little bridge over the streamlet that would wind its way through her garden and down toward the pond in the South American Garden. She could hardly wait to show her father when it was all finished.

Sarah was in her apartment sitting at her small desk and alternately gazing out the window and drawing little dancers on a sheet of paper. She hoped they would be good enough to use as part of the poster for the upcoming Northwest Junior Dance Festival that was scheduled in August. She glanced at the clock, and saw that she still had half an hour before she had to leave for

the team meeting about Marty. A cloud moved slowly across the blue sky as she watched, but it didn't look like it held any rain. She drew another dancer and smiled to herself, remembering her dance with Shawn at his birthday party. She was glad he liked her. She liked him more than she knew how to put into words. And she already knew how hard it would be to find boys who wanted to be close to her, at least after they saw the right side of her face and neck. Rachael had explained to her how some people would be bothered if she and Shawn were close because he was nine years older than she was. She wished she could make everyone understand that during her life she had already been awake the same number of hours as someone who was fifteen or sixteen years old.

Ashley felt that the soil was ready where she wanted to plant the flower bulbs she had selected. She cut one last piece of cedar edging board to length and worked it into the ground. Then she opened the bag and pulled out the first bulb.

With a test-fitting of the base stones completed, Liberty poured half a bag of fiber-reinforced cement into her mixing bucket and began to slowly add water. She knew that after it was mixed, she would have about an hour before it began to set, and figured that would be plenty of time. As she stirred the thick, gray mud, she remembered that she still needed to dip the stones in water before she applied the cement.

Sarah drew another dancer, this time a boy ballet dancer. She thought that was only fair, as the festival would include both girls and boys. Then her pencil stopped moving, her eyes glazed over, and her skin became cold and sweaty. A face came into focus, a face almost completely hidden behind a bush, a man's face, and then a black metal thing in front of the face, a gun, lifted up to his eye level. Her heart pounded inside her. And suddenly she saw Liberty in her garden, stirring something in a bucket, and she knew the gun was pointed at her friend.

LIBERTY! DUCK! she screamed inside her mind with more force than she had ever used before in sending a telepathic message.

Liberty didn't receive an intelligible message that she could ponder at her leisure. The thought that formed in her head was more like the impact of a sledge hammer, and she could do nothing but obey it instantly and without

question. She fell on her face in the dirt, the bucket tipped over, and something whizzed over her head and pinged off the pile of stones.

RUN, LIBERTY, RUN! the next thought screamed inside her head.

Liberty's mind was racing. She didn't know the source of the messages she was receiving, but she instantly recognized the thing that had flown over her head, and she knew that she wasn't behind any effective cover. She jumped up and ran.

The path she was bolting down was twisty and it headed toward the main buildings. Liberty was glad of both things. She was in better shape than ever before in her life, and her blood stream was rapidly filling with adrenaline. She hoped and prayed that her speed would give her enough distance from whoever was shooting at her. Then she saw Ashley in her garden peering into a paper bag. Liberty skidded to a stop.

"Ashley, help! Someone shot at me!" she said with a voice that was shaking and nearly screaming at the same time.

Ashley bounced up and glanced around, but saw no one else. She was, however, immediately convinced by the tone of Liberty's plea that this was no joke. "Let's get inside!"

Together they ran on down the path and soon burst into the members' parking lot in front of the Residential Lobby. They kept running, side by side, and would soon be indoors where they could get all the help they needed.

They were about halfway across the parking lot when Ashley focused on something she hadn't at first seen. Standing right beside the door was a man. He was dressed more formally than Lyceum members usually dressed unless they were on duty at a conference or other event. Ashley didn't recognize him. But she saw him pull something out from under his coat and raise it to his eye level, and she realized it was a gun and it was being aimed at Liberty.

No one points a gun at my friend! she said to herself, and instantly used the only weapon she had at her command.

Liberty saw Ashley suddenly double her speed and fly straight ahead toward the man. Liberty was just beginning to wonder who he was. Then she saw the gun and screamed, "ASHLEY!"

But Ashley had already launched herself into the air just a few yards away from the stranger and was curling herself into a tumbling mass of fury.

Liberty saw Ashley collide with the man, and she heard the gun go off, and she saw them both fly through the large glass window that was beside the door. The sound of breaking glass filled the air. Liberty kept running, but tears were filling her eyes and she could hardly see.

By the time Liberty got inside the Residential Lobby a few seconds later, everything had come to rest. Glass was everywhere, the man lay still with his head at a funny angle, and Ashley was sprawled on the floor with glass under her, glass on top of her, and a pool of blood rapidly forming around her.

Liberty was gasping for air and crying. She tried to scream for help but nothing would come out of her mouth. She managed to see a computer screen through her tears, dashed to it, and pounded on what she hoped were the emergency call key until lights started flashing and an alarm started wailing. Then she ran to her friend.

Ashley lay still, with blood pouring from her face and neck and arms. With every heartbeat, more of the precious red liquid came flowing out. Liberty knew that she had to stop the blood. Somehow she had to keep her friend from bleeding to death, and she had to do it now. She had nothing to work with but her own hands, and they were shaking. Her tears made it hard to see, and she couldn't keep her breath from coming in desperate gasps. But none of that mattered — the only thing that was important was stopping the freely-flowing blood. Liberty forced her will to focus on the problem. Then she picked the two worst gashes and placed her trembling hands over them. The blood pouring from them seemed to be slowed, but there were many other cuts still letting Ashley's life flow into the carpet beneath her. "Help!" Liberty screamed, but still couldn't make much sound come out of her mouth. "Help!"

Seconds later others ran into the room and helped Liberty to put pressure on Ashley's many cuts. Liberty could not remember ever feeling so relieved, and she knew that even if bullets were flying at her, she would not have left Ashley's side at that moment.



The instant Liberty had jumped up and run from her garden, Sarah had telepathically contacted Rachael. It had taken Rachael awhile to calm Sarah down enough so that she could learn what was going on, and in the process

Sarah had completely ruined her drawings with tears and shaking hands, but eventually Rachael had been able to piece together everything Sarah had seen.

Breathe slowly, Sarah.

I'm trying.

I can sense Liberty. She's scared, but she's okay. Wait a minute. Rachael looked at the computer screen beside her desk in the Gallery workroom. There's a security and medical emergency in the Residential Lobby. Meet me there.

Sarah ran down the steps and across the lobby of her residence hall as fast as her legs would carry her, and then along the outdoor walkway toward the scene of the emergency. She arrived at the same time as her mentor. She had never before seen so much blood, and knowing that it was Ashley's blood almost made her scream with terror.

Rachael quickly sized up the situation. Ashley already had plenty of medics and helpers around her. "Sarah, look at the man. Is he the one you saw?"

Sarah shook her head. She didn't want to look at the man.

"You have to! The timing isn't right. I don't think the one you saw could have gotten here so quickly. I think there's two of them!"

Sarah forced herself to look at the man. His neck was twisted strangely and he was white. Sarah wanted to puke, but she made herself remember what she had seen.

"No... not the same."

"Come on!" Rachael said, taking her hand and breaking into a run toward the Main Lobby.

Sarah was glad to get away from all the blood and death. They didn't stop running until they were at the front doors that led out to the Main Plaza.

Rachael stooped down and took Sarah's hands in hers. She used telepathy so the many visitors in the lobby wouldn't be alarmed. *The man you saw won't go anywhere near the Residential Lobby. Too many people there. He'll probably try to get away, through the Welcome Center or the Main Parking Lot. Go see if you can spot him. I'll get my gun and be right behind you. If he gets into a car, try to remember the license. Otherwise wait for me.*

Sarah nodded and ran out the door toward the Welcome Center. She was on the edge of screaming terror, but she knew she was the only one who could find the man who had fired the first shot. She didn't know exactly why Ashley had gone through the window, but she guessed that somehow it was to help Liberty. If Ashley could do that for her friend, Sarah was determined to keep down her fears and do her best to help Rachael find the first man.

There were a number of people at the passenger loading zone waiting for the next van. Sarah slowed to a walk as she came through the Welcome Center's covered archway and tried to catch her breath, wiping her face on her sleeve at the same time. She began to wander amongst the people, looking for the face she had seen. As she looked, she could hear Rachael's feet running across the Plaza.

Rachael arrived and stopped in the archway, scanning the scene before her. After several seconds, it was obvious that Sarah hadn't identified anyone, and she was just about to steer her young friend on toward the parking lot. But then she noticed that Sarah had frozen, and was looking up at a middle-aged man who was right in front of her.

Him! Sarah said wordlessly to Rachael.

Rachael could see that the man was afraid, and so she moved forward as slowly and nonchalantly as she could, but at just that moment two other things happened. The van that everyone was waiting for came around the corner, and a siren was heard somewhere in the distance. The man felt trapped, and he panicked.

Sarah was the closest person to him, and she looked young and helpless, so he grabbed her as a shield and pulled out his gun. "Stay back, everyone!"

All of the visitors scattered away from the man and his gun, some of them screaming.

"Everyone out of the van!" he demanded.

Rachael had no intention of letting him take Sarah hostage. She knew that course of action had little chance of turning out well for Sarah. She knelt down on one knee and brought out her large-caliber semiautomatic pistol. A deadly shot at that moment would blow Sarah's arm off, but she took deadly aim anyway.

When I say, spin to your right, toward the parking lot. Understand?

Sarah was shaking like a leaf, and looked frozen with fright.

Understand?

Yes. Toward the parking lot.

“Let’s talk!” Rachael said.

“Empty the van, leave the motor running, and we’ll talk!”

“Okay,” Rachael said out loud. *NOW SARAH!* she mentally projected.

The man’s grip had not been very tight at that moment, thinking he had won an escape route. Sarah twisted and Rachael squeezed the trigger. The noise of the shot was so loud that most of the visitors screamed and covered their ears, and both the man and Sarah flew backward into the vehicle lane.

Rachael ran forward, and quickly saw that her aim had indeed been deadly, as a serious chunk of the man’s chest was missing, and both he and Sarah, who lay close beside him, were covered with blood. But Rachael knew that her hand had not been perfectly steady, and she did not know if Sarah had twisted far enough. She was worried. Sarah showed no signs of life.

After flipping the safety on her gun, she set it down and began to feel for wounds on her young friend. She had been forced to make a choice, forced to decide if Sarah’s chances were better being taken hostage, or being frighteningly close to the deadly shot. She hoped, she prayed that she had made the right choice, and her heart trembled inside her. If she had chosen wrong, she would want to be locked away in the deepest, darkest prison cell. And if they wouldn’t lock her away, she would make her own cell, in some unknown corner of the Lyceum campus, and never come out.

But Rachael could find no wound on Sarah’s chest or shoulder. Finally, as she was working down Sarah’s arm, she found it. The flexor muscles of Sarah’s left forearm had been torn open, but as far as Rachael could tell, the bone was not broken. It was a flesh wound. She breathed a sigh of relief as she clamped her hand over it to stem the bleeding.



Soon there were plenty of medics around Ashley, but Liberty was reluctant to let go of the cuts on her friend’s neck and arms. Then she heard Jason’s voice in her ear and felt his arms around her waist.

“Brother Kenneth is ready to take over, Lib.”

She looked down and saw that her hands were shaking, and that the doctor

was ready to apply compresses. She reluctantly lifted her blood-covered fingers. Ashley's cuts immediately began to gush, but Brother Kenneth quickly covered them while a helper wiped away the blood and then taped on the compresses.

Liberty felt weak and sick and began to fall backwards. Jason caught her and held her in his arms. She started retching, but nothing was in her stomach. He continued to hold her and speak to her softly.

A few moments later Brenda knelt beside. "Hi, Liberty. How are you feeling?"

"I don't know. How is Ashley?"

"Alive, and we're going to get her to the hospital. She's very strong. Can I examine you?"

"I guess..."

Brenda looked into Liberty's eyes, felt her pulse, and did several other things. Liberty watched as Ashley was carefully placed on a stretcher.

"Oh, God, I just remembered that his gun went off. Was Ashley hit?"

"Kenneth, possibility of a bullet wound!" Brenda called out.

"I haven't found one, but thank you."

Suddenly everyone heard another gunshot, from somewhere outside, toward the front of the campus. Liberty heard Brother Fred's voice near her talking into his pager. More members arrived whom Liberty knew were on security teams, and most of them dashed outside. A moment later Brother Fred and three other members were kneeling around her.

"Liberty, you know Brother Tom and Sister Shannon Eileen. They're both armed, and at least one of them is going to stay near you at all times for your protection."

Liberty smiled weakly.

"And I don't know if you've met Sister Samantha..."

"She's in my piloting class."

"I'm also a lawyer, Liberty," the older lady said, "so I'll be with you during all interviews. The Sheriff will be here soon."

"Thank you," Liberty said, still in somewhat of a daze, and still in Jason's arms.



Medics and security teams quickly arrived at the passenger loading zone to care for Sarah and analyze the situation. Visitors who had been waiting for the van, and who had witnessed the event, were made comfortable in the Welcome Center, and a tray of sandwiches and other goodies was brought out from the kitchen. Several cars from the Sheriff's Department arrived minutes later.

Deputies cordoned off the scene and detectives began to interview the witnesses. As soon as they had given their statements, three vans were used to transport them directly to their destinations, and each person received a voucher for a weekend of free lodging, meals, and other services as token of Lyceum's apologies.

Lastly, Sister Rachael was interviewed by a detective, at length, with a Lyceum lawyer present.

"How did you know that this man was the one who had shot at the other girl earlier?"

"Sarah told me as soon as she recognized him," Rachael replied calmly.

"You mean she just blurted it out while standing right there in front of him?"

"No. She was discrete... but clear."

The detective considered this for a moment, but didn't feel any need to dig into the issue further, given the statements he had already taken that clearly showed the man's guilt through his actions. "Have you ever shot anyone else?"

"Rachael," the lawyer interrupted, "you don't have to do their research for them."

"No problem. It's on public record. Seven years ago, Denver, Colorado."

"Disposition?"

"In defense of self and others."

"Thank you. What if your young friend had twisted in the wrong direction when you pulled the trigger?"

The lawyer was ready to jump in, but Rachael raised a hand.

"We all have many *if's* in our lives. We have to weight the risks in every situation, and sometimes all of the options weigh about the same. Luckily we don't have to answer for the paths we didn't take."

The detective nodded understandingly. "Thank you very much. No travel plans in the next few days?"

"None."

"I'll have your gun back to you in about a week."

"As I'm sure you know, I have another."

The detective let a slight smile cross his face to show that he did indeed know, and went to join the deputies who were searching the area around Liberty's garden.



By the time Sister Rachael returned to the Main Office, Liberty had already been interviewed and was in a telecommunications booth talking to her father. Sister Samantha and Jason were with her, and her guards waited right outside the door.

Ashley and Sarah had long since been whisked away to the hospital in one of Lyceum's helicopters, along with Shawn, Brother Kenneth, and Sister Heather. The Healing Arts Clinic could have handled their wounds, but Ashley needed blood, and both needed cerebral scans in case of concussions. Rachael made sure that the girls' parents had been contacted, and learned that they were literally on their way, with all travel arrangements and costs covered. She was glad to hear that Sister Laura was accompanying Ashley's parents.

Rachael glanced at a computer screen and noticed that campus security was at Level Three, which meant that all the security teams were on-duty, and they were discretely armed. She watched as a detective wrote out receipts for two pieces of evidence they had found: the rock that the first bullet had struck, and the slug itself, found in the dirt some ways away.

"Lieutenant, have you cleared the scenes for entry yet?" Rachael asked.

"Yes, I believe so. Have any thoughts?"

"I only got a quick look at the broken glass, and I haven't seen the garden at all. I'll spend a little time in each, and then I want to head up to the hospital."

"I'll see you there."

"Any I.D. on the men?"

"Yeah. Fake ones."

“Interesting!”



When Sister Rachael, Liberty, Jason, and Brother Tom arrived at the hospital three hours later, both injured girls were out of surgery but were still unconscious. Because of the recent incident, Rachael was careful to be unarmed. Brother Tom could not make the same claim.

When they got to the waiting area near the recovery room, Sarah’s mother was already there, as well as Shawn, Sister Heather, and Sister Samantha. Greetings were exchanged and introductions made. Rachael sat down with a humble posture beside the worried mother.

“I’m sorry that Sarah had to feel that bullet, but the alternatives seemed even worse.”

“Sister Samantha explained to me what happened,” the slender lady of about forty-five said. “I never thought I’d say thank you to someone for shooting my daughter, but after thinking about it, I’m very glad you didn’t let that man take her hostage.”

The two ladies, close in age, looked at each other knowingly for a long moment while holding hands. Then Liberty came over and knelt before them.

“Sarah saved my life. If there’s anything I can ever do for her... or for you... I’ll do it... no matter what it takes.”

The lady was deeply touched. After wiping her eyes, she reached out and put her hand on Liberty’s shoulder. “Sarah told me recently that she had to wait a long time to be friends with you, Liberty, and she was very happy when you both started trusting each other.”

Liberty blushed and hung her head, remembering her initial conflict with Sarah, and all those months during which she hadn’t really liked the nine-year-old.

Not much later, Sister Laura arrived with Ashley’s mother and father. Liberty stood, and the other Lyceum members in the room knew not to interfere. She faced the two confused parents.

“Ashley is one of my most special friends. We were both accepted into Lyceum at the same time, and we’ve been close ever since. She has a lot of bad cuts, but she’s going to be okay. It happened because... someone was trying to kill me... and Ashley saved my life. Please, if you’re mad at anybody,

you should be mad at me.”

They looked at Liberty, who was on the verge of tears, and couldn't do anything but put their arms around her. And even as the three of them were standing there in the waiting area, Senator Buchanan entered.

“Daddy!” Liberty screamed and ran to him, letting him just hold her for a minute. Then she took him by the hand and led him across the room.

“Daddy, these are Ashley's parents.”

“Hello. I am indebted to you for your daughter's courage,” the senator said.

“And this is Sarah's mom.”

“I am indebted to you also. Liberty is my only child, and I am so glad I didn't lose her, but I am equally as glad that your daughters are recovering.”

“Ashley is our adopted daughter,” Mr. Riddle said, “but we have no other children, and she is as precious to us as our own daughter would be.”

“I understand,” Michael Buchanan said.

“I must admit that I've never really understood my daughter, because of her... differences,” Sarah's mother said, “but I love her, and I'm glad she's going to be okay, and I'm glad her friend Ashley is going to be okay too.”

At that moment a doctor entered the waiting area. “Are all of you here to see Ashley and Sarah?”

They all affirmed with words or nods.

“They are both doing well. Only a minor concussion was detected in Sarah, nothing that a few weeks of rest won't take care of at her age. We're taking them off sedatives now, and they should be awake at about six o'clock. A detective from the Sheriff's Office will be here to ask them a few questions at that time.”

“I am their legal counsel,” Sister Samantha said, “and no interviews should take place without my presence.”

“I'll make sure of it,” the doctor said. “All visiting will have to be very quiet and relaxed. Ashley especially cannot move much for several days.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Sister Rachael said, looking at her watch. “We have about two hours before we can see our friends and daughters. May I suggest we select one of the nearby restaurants so that we are relaxed and nourished when our brave young ladies wake up? And some of you have luggage. We

can stop by our van in the hospital parking lot first. Lyceum is taking care of all your needs, and of course all the needs of your daughters.”

Liberty walked hand in hand with Sarah’s mother, and Jason walked beside Senator Buchanan as they all headed out toward the elevator.



Shortly before six o’clock that evening, all of the parents, friends, and other Lyceum members gathered once again in the hospital, this time on the floor where Ashley and Sarah had been moved into a semi-private room. The Sheriff’s detective was also there waiting. The same doctor came down the hall a few minutes later.

“They’re awake. Remember, I need you all to keep your interviews and visits very low-key.”

They all nodded and followed the doctor to the room. Ashley’s mother gasped and began crying when she saw her daughter, who had most of her face and neck covered with bandages. Her husband comforted her, and after a moment they were able to approach their daughter’s bedside.

“Hi, Mom. Please don’t worry. I won’t have the bandages on for very long. It’s just a few cuts and scratches.”

Ashley’s mother wanted to hold her daughter, but it obviously wasn’t possible. Ashley sensed her need.

“You can hold my hand, Mom, but I can’t move my arms yet.”

The troubled mother carefully took her adopted daughter’s hand in hers, and was relieved when Ashley was able to squeeze her fingers.

“Honey,” her father began, “do you want to come home? Do you want us to get you out of here?”

“No, Dad. This is my home. I did what I had to do because someone was trying to hurt my friend. I would have done the same thing for Julie in Rapid City.”

“But wouldn’t you feel safer some place where there’s more... supervision?”

“And give up everything that’s important to me, just so I can have a teacher on lunch duty telling me when I can come and when I can go? Thanks, Dad, but what I really need is for you and Mom to understand what happened. Jesus would have risked his life for a friend, wouldn’t he? All I

wanted to do was what was right.”

Mr. Riddle joined his wife in holding Ashley’s hand. “I’m sorry, Honey, I just wanted to be sure no one was keeping you in a bad situation.”

“Dad, I promise you that no one will ever be able to do that.”

Even as Ashley was talking to her parents, Sarah’s mother sat down beside her daughter’s bed. “Hi, Puka.”

“Hi, Mom. Thanks for coming to see me.”

“How do you feel?”

“Splitting headache. And I can’t feel my upper arm at all.”

“You were very brave.”

“I don’t remember being brave. But I remember Ashley lying there in all the glass and blood. That was the worst part.”

“The doctor says you can go home tomorrow.”

“Good. I wouldn’t know what to do here in the middle of the night.”

Sarah’s mother smiled, remembering the years of raising a child who rarely slept, and who always knew everything her mother was thinking. Now her daughter was almost a young lady. She wondered what lay ahead for Sarah, and what happiness her daughter would be able to find in life.

The detective approached Ashley and her parents. “I just want to ask a few quick questions to complete my investigation. Do you feel up to it, Ashley?”

“Sure.”

Sister Samantha sat down nearby.

“When you were running beside Liberty toward the door, what made you decide the man standing there was a danger?”

“He was aiming a gun at Liberty.”

“Were you sure it was a gun?”

“I was as sure as I could be.”

“I have to ask this next question, even though, as your lawyer will point out, you don’t have to answer because I can find out from public records. Have you ever killed anyone before, Ashley?”

Ashley glanced at Sister Samantha.

“You only have to answer if you want to, Ashley.”

Ashley looked troubled. “I don’t mind answering. No, I haven’t. But... did I kill someone this time?”

Sister Samantha decided she should be the one to speak. “The man broke his neck when he went through the window, Ashley. Based on the circumstances I’m aware of right now, it will be recorded as a justifiable homicide, and you’re not guilty of any crime.”

“That will be my recommended disposition,” the detective said, “unless new evidence comes to light, which I don’t anticipate.”

Ashley wasn’t listening. She was crying silently. She wished she could curl up in a little ball and hide somewhere. She had never imagined, in her wildest dreams, that she would ever kill someone with her gymnastics skills.

The detective went over to talk to Sarah, and Ashley lay there feeling terrible. Shawn had overheard the last discussion and came over to the far side of her bed and took her other hand.

“Hi, Ashes. I’ve never been tested like that yet... but I hope that if I ever am, I make the right choice... like you did.”

He squeezed her hand tightly. She blinked her eyes to try to clear them of tears. Her father noticed and dabbed at them with a tissue, and as he did so he began to understand what his daughter needed. She was not a little girl who needed to be protected from every little danger in the world. She was a big girl dealing with large, heavy questions.

“Honey, your mother and I also feel that you made the right decision. Imagine how terrible you would feel right now if you had stood by and watched your friend get shot.”

“I would feel ten times as bad,” Ashley said.

“Yes, you did the right thing,” her mother said.

Ashley looked at her parents. “I think and hope and pray I made the right choice. Thanks, Dad. Thanks, Mom. I sure am glad you’re here.”

As soon as the detective was finished talking to Sarah, Liberty stood up. “Sir, I need to add something to my statement.”

“Of course, Liberty.”

“When you asked me if I knew who would want to kill me, or why, I wasn’t thinking very deeply. I was just thinking about myself, in the literal sense.”

“And you have a new idea?”

“Yes. You see, this is my father,” she said, and the senator stood and extended his hand to the detective.

"I'm Senator Michael Buchanan of Pennsylvania. Glad to meet you, Lieutenant."

Everyone in the room could see the wheels turning in the detective's head.

"Senator Michael Buchanan... aren't you... spearheading the congressional effort on that new weapons treaty?"

"Yes, the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty."

"Okay. Now I'm beginning to see what might be going on here. That thing is the political hot potato of the decade, isn't it?"

The senator chuckled. "That's one of the nicer things I've heard it called."

"So... the possibility exists, although we have no direct evidence yet, that the attempt on your life, Liberty, was an effort to influence your father."

"That's the only thing I can think of," Liberty said.

Her father added, "The Treaty is the only thing I'm involved with that's controversial enough to warrant... extreme persuasion tactics."

The detective raised his eyebrows at the senator's euphemism. "This brings up some rather dark possibilities for who the two men were, who sent them, and what kind of danger Liberty still might face."

"I'm going to work with Lyceum on security measures for Liberty," the senator said.

"Good. There isn't much the Sheriff's Department can do."

"I understand."

"Thank you for your additional insights, Liberty," the detective said. He shook hands with several people, and then left.

Liberty saw that most everyone who wanted to talk to the injured girls had already done so. She approached Sarah first, somehow feeling that talking to her would be easier.

"Sarah... you saved my life. I owe you... more than I can ever pay."

"I hope you'll be my friend for a long time, but not because you owe me anything. I hope you'll be my friend just because you want to."

"I do want to be your friend. I've felt a deep bond with you ever since... we discovered we have something in common."

Sarah nodded understandingly.

"But, in addition to being your friend, I owe you my life, and I'm never going to forget that. If you ever need anything from me, it is yours."

Sarah smiled. “Does that mean I get a discount on slices of your cheesecake?”

Both girls giggled, and Liberty made a mental note to bake Sarah her own cheesecake as soon as possible.

Then Liberty went over to Ashley’s bed. Sarah had saved her life by sending a telepathic message. Ashley had saved her life by going through a large glass window, and doing so could have just as easily broken Ashley’s neck. Liberty sat down and looked at her wounded friend, then stared at her own hands in her lap for awhile, then looked at Ashley again.

“I never had friends like you guys back in Philadelphia. I don’t know how I can ever pay you back... but if you ever need me to do anything for you...”

“Yeah!” Ashley said, obviously in a much better mood than Liberty. “You can lead the Special Olympics in Pierre, South Dakota this weekend! I was supposed to do it, but I don’t think I’ll be able to. Maybe Tabitha can go with you — they like a little gymnastics thrown in.”

“Um... gosh... I’ve never done anything like that before. And I don’t know anything about... Special Olympics. But... if you need me to... I’ll do my best.”

“It’s easy. There’s a book about it in the library, and I’ll give you some pointers before you go.”

Liberty took a deep breath. It wasn’t something she would have ever chosen to do. But she was alive, thanks to Ashley and Sarah. Doing something she didn’t want to do was much better than being dead, and much easier than tumbling through a glass window. And Liberty had been hoping for some assignments that would allow her a little more travel, like those Ashley was always doing. She smiled, and then squeezed Ashley’s hand, the very best friend she could ever imagine having.



Chapter 11: Adjusting to New Realities

When Liberty met Tabitha in the Dining Hall just before breakfast, the older girl had a book in hand.

“Hi, Tabby.”

Tabitha gave Liberty a searching look. “You didn’t get much sleep, did you?”

Liberty shook her head and turned away. She had just spent the entire night thinking about, worrying about, and fretting about the enormous debt she had incurred the day before. She knew it wasn’t a debt anyone would ever expect her to pay in the literal sense. But it was a burden she knew she was going to carry for a long time, no matter how many nice things she did for Ashley and Sarah.

Many times during the previous night she had looked into the eyes of the Reaper, and pondered where she would be now if either Sarah, or Ashley, hadn’t acted. And she didn’t like the conclusions she had reached every time.

She didn’t know if there was a Heaven, or a Hell. If they did exist, then she was ready to wager that both of her benefactors would qualify for the preferred place. But she definitely didn’t feel safe risking money on her own chances of getting there.

But if neither place existed, as she had so far in her life always believed, then the idea of dying was even more frightening, and thinking about it nearly sent her into a panic. Luckily, she had spent the night with Jason, and he had placed a comforting arm around her each time she had started to tremble or

cry. He hadn't gotten much sleep either.

"I'm sorry," Liberty finally said. "No, I didn't sleep very well. But at least I got the book."

Tabitha smiled reassuringly. "Ashley told me it's a good book, but there's nothing in it about what she does. And since what she does is what they're paying us for, we'll have to learn from her very quickly!"

"But they were just planning on paying for Ashley to come. Aren't they going to be ticked that they have to pay for two of us?"

"Actually, there will be three of us. Sister Shannon Eileen will be along for security."

"I forgot about that," Liberty said guiltily.

"But we're not charging them any extra. We'll lose a bunch of money on it, but Lyceum always keeps its promises. You should know that by now!"

Liberty nodded, Tabitha put a hand on her shoulder, and together they walked across the Dining Hall toward the table where Senator Buchanan was awaiting them.

"Good morning, ladies. I haven't ordered yet," he said as they sat down. His words seemed cheerful, but his tone and facial expression revealed his deep concerns.

"I just want a fruit salad," Tabitha said.

"Are you sure that's all you want?" he said. "It's on me..."

"Yeah. I'm in the gym at nine. There's an invitational meet in Rome in three weeks that I'm getting ready for."

"Wow, that's neat, Tabby!" Liberty said. "You know, you and I have hardly had a chance to even talk, but now that we're working together on this mission for Ashley, I'm starting to think that you're my kind of person!"

"Thank you, Liberty. I've admired you ever since you came to Lyceum. It'll be fun working with you this weekend."

"Let me see..." Liberty said while looking at the menu, clearly in a better mood, "I want scrambled eggs, hash browns, and a fruit cup."

Sister Carolyn came by and took their order, giving Liberty a squeeze on the shoulder before she left.

"I'm going to meet with some people in your security department right after breakfast, Liberty," her father said. "You've got some really wonderful

friends here, but now that we know someone is going to try to get at me through you, we can't count on your friends always being just where you need them."

Liberty sipped at her herb tea and looked at her father. She could see deep lines of care and worry in his face. "I really appreciate that, Daddy. But I don't want to crawl away and hide from the world."

"And I have no fantasies that I could make you do that. To this day, I am amazed that I managed to keep you at the country house for an entire year. And now that you can ride horses, I'm sure I couldn't keep you there again."

Liberty smiled. "This may surprise you, Daddy, but I look back at that year with fondness. It let me find Lyceum, and Lyceum gave me Jason, Ashley, and Shawn, and I'm making new friends like Sarah and Tabitha."

"I won't ask you to part with your friends, but I am going to ask you to put up with some inconveniences for the sake of security, at least until after the Treaty issue is over."

Liberty's food arrived, and she began eating, wondering what security measures she might have to put up with. But then she thought of what Ashley and Sarah were putting up with, and she realized she had absolutely no cause for complaint.



By mid-day, Liberty and Tabitha had read the book about Special Olympics, and had a number of questions ready for Ashley. Senator Buchanan emerged from his meeting with Brother Fred and Sister Shannon Eileen looking satisfied, and Sister Heather returned from a long walk in the gardens with Ashley's parents. They met in the Main Lobby, and were soon joined by Sister Rachael, Shawn, and Sarah's mother, the three of whom had been talking while watching the animals in the Petting Zoo. From there, they walked together, silently passing through the Residential Lobby where members were working to replace the window and the blood-stained carpet. Brother Tom had been inconspicuously near Liberty all morning, but now he walked openly with them to the awaiting van.

When they arrived at the hospital room, Sarah was already dressed, sitting on her bed, her left arm in a sling. She was glad to be going home, but sad that Ashley could not yet join her.

Ashley had some of her bandages off, those that had just been covering scrapes and minor cuts, but there were still several on her face, neck, and upper arms. After her parents visited with her for awhile, Liberty and Tabitha got out their list of questions, and the three of them appeared to be willing and able to talk about Special Olympics for several hours to come. At two o'clock, Senator Buchanan interrupted.

"I have to head for the airport, ladies. I'll be in touch almost every day, Liberty, in case there are any new developments. Brother Fred will fill you in on what we decided."

Liberty went to her father and embraced him. "Don't forget, they might try to hurt you, too, Daddy."

"That's a risk I'll have to take, Honey. I've never felt that anything in my entire political career was as important as this treaty. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't do everything possible to see it through."

"I understand. But you can't expect me to be careful unless you are too."

"I promise. I'll be careful," he said in barely more than a whisper.

Sister Rachael drove him to the airport, and when she returned, the girls were finally getting tired of talking about Special Olympics, and a nurse wanted to change Ashley's dressings, so the Lyceum members and parents wrapped up their visit and headed back to the campus, taking Sarah with them, and promising to return that evening.



The following morning at breakfast, a seemingly new member was introduced by Sister Ruth. She was about sixteen years old, had long blond hair, and her name was Sister Nancy. Shawn and Sarah thought she looked a little familiar, but they were confused, as Sister Ruth hadn't actually said she was a new member, but had merely introduced her to the four hundred and fifteen members present, emphasizing her name.

When the mysterious girl sat down in the seat next to Jason that they assumed he had been saving for Liberty, who for some reason was late to breakfast, everything became clear.

By the time all of Ashley's friends and parents gathered just after lunch to head for the hospital, the girl's long blond hair had changed to a very different, medium-length style. She announced to them all that a certain L-

word was not to be used in relation to her until further notice. She was Sister Nancy for all purposes. Her friends smiled and understood.

To their delight, Ashley was sitting up when they arrived and could start walking around that afternoon, but the hospital wanted to care for her wounds and monitor her blood for one more day. She grinned when she saw Liberty's new hair and heard of her new identity. Then Liberty and Tabitha asked her more questions about Special Olympics, and her parents talked with her for a long time. Ashley was a little sad that she wouldn't be able to visit her hometown that weekend, but vowed to take a vacation as soon as she was healed enough to travel.



After dinner that evening, Liberty arrived at the Gallery where Sarah was carefully dusting the artworks with her good hand. Liberty was carrying a covered silver cake platter and there was a smirk on her face. Rachael and Shawn gathered around to watch. Liberty uncovered the platter to reveal the cheesecake she had made for Sarah, each slice topped with a different fruit sauce: strawberry, blueberry, raspberry, blackberry, apricot, pineapple, kiwi, mandarin orange, gooseberry, peach, banana, and mango. Sarah's face lit up, and she hugged Liberty as best she could.

"I'll make you one of these whenever you want," Liberty said. "Just don't get fat, okay?"

Sarah laughed.

Liberty and Tabitha packed small suitcases, stopped by the hospital to visit with Ashley for a little longer, and then were driven to the airport along with Sister Shannon Eileen. They knew they would arrive in Pierre, South Dakota in the middle of the night after changing planes twice. They were as ready to fill Ashley's shoes as they could be. They only hoped they had what it would take.



On Saturday morning, June first, the world's second Lyceum campus opened near Atlanta, Georgia.

Because of the attacks earlier in the year by a prominent television evangelist, and certain other socio-political considerations, the decision had been made to open quietly, without public ceremony or celebration, without

even an announced opening date. Directory listings, pamphlets, newspaper ads, and other information were simply timed to not reach the public until on or after June first.

On that first Saturday, Lyceum Dixie had seven visitors.

About mid-morning, a black family of two parents and three children drove in looking for a place to picnic. Somewhat in awe of the extensive facilities, and half expecting to be asked to pay a fee or show credentials at any moment, they carefully followed little signs that directed them to the Picnic Area and Playground. Many members were out gardening or finishing construction details, and they greeted their first guests warmly, but they all knew not to make any fuss over this being Lyceum's first day of operations.

It was the three children who began to discover more and more of the campus, and joyfully coax their parents into seeing gardens, fountains, the small Petting Zoo, and eventually the Snack Bar and Cafeteria. There, the first slices of Sister Colleen's strawberry rhubarb pie were served to non-members.

Late that afternoon, an elderly couple arrived on campus who had picked up a pamphlet from a tourist information center just that morning, and had realized that Lyceum was located on the precise back road that they wanted to explore. They were immediately enamored by the gardens and shrines, thoroughly enjoyed their dinners of prime rib and broiled halibut, and became Lyceum Dixie's first overnight guests.

The members of the new Lyceum were happy. They still had a great deal of work to do before the campus could host large conferences or busloads of visitors. They hoped that many people would come and go from the new campus with good reports and fond memories before those arrived who equated tolerance and diversity with evil.



There was danger of having so many members in the van as it left to bring Ashley home from the hospital that there wouldn't be a place for Ashley to sit on the way back. Sister Heather had to start saying *no* when more and more people who admired the young gymnast wanted to join the welcoming committee. They understood, and went to work on gifts, cards, or decorations.

Lyceum had plenty of experience at dealing with minor security problems.

Persons arrived constantly who wanted to pass out religious tracts, make speeches, picket events, or vandalize the shrines of religions not their own. Often enough, journalists came to the campus on rumor that some famous or infamous person could be found there, and were willing to harass any number of people to get their story. Lyceum had even lived through several visits from extremely judgmental persons such as the Reverend Tommy Mitchell. Shawn's father had been anxious to leave. Others had required assistance in making the decision to depart.

But very few deadly dangers had actually come to the campus. The shots fired at Liberty, and the necessary actions taken by Sarah, Ashley, and Rachael had deeply shaken the entire membership. Most of them were smart enough to know that the knee-jerk implementation of new policies and procedures, as would be the practice in most organizations and governments, would be an effort at appearing to solve the problem, not at actually solving it. Fences and patrols would not keep out the kind of gunmen who had come for Liberty.

In conference with Senator Buchanan, the immediate need to protect Liberty's life had been addressed. Many of the protective measures that had gone into effect were not even known to Liberty herself. Her father had insisted on paying for at least part of the cost, and Lyceum had left that up to him. Liberty was a member, and Lyceum was not in the habit of knowingly allowing its members to be murdered.

In a sense, new policies and procedures had already been put into place. More than four hundred members, all of whom had very sharp minds, now knew that such a transgression of their sanctuary was possible. Those four hundred sharp minds had eyes and ears that were all wide open.

But as much as the people of Lyceum wanted to protect the one in danger, they also wanted to honor the three people who had risked their lives or reputations. Even though Ashley had not yet given it any thought, nearly everyone else knew that facial scars could radically change the course of her life. Sarah was already handicapped with acid burns on her face and neck. She didn't need a large scare on her upper arm. Even though the detective seemed favorably disposed toward the action Sister Rachael had taken, they all knew that people were still imprisoned every day for defending themselves

and others.

As soon as Heather, Rachael, Sarah, and Ashley's parents had left for the hospital, everyone else who could be spared from other events went into high gear setting up Conference Center Two. By the time the van returned, they were ready. With Liberty gone for the weekend, this celebration was for the rescuers. This was their moment to receive honor.

They knew something was up when Sister Heather guided the van toward the public side of the campus and entered the conference center parking lot. As the vehicle came to a halt opposite the large double doors, they opened and a roll of carpet came tumbling toward the van, getting smaller and smaller, and finally completing its journey right at the curb. It was red. Ashley, Sarah, and Rachael were all smiles.

Members lined up on both sides of the red carpet, and Shawn had the honor of opening the van door for them. Everyone clapped as the trio made their way into the conference center, Ashley moving very slowly with her proud parents coming directly behind.

Inside they found the huge room decorated with streamers and balloons, flowers and banners. There were enough seats for about half of the members currently on campus, and most of those were full. On the speaker's platform were three large chairs decorated to look like regal thrones. And on both sides of the room were serving tables loaded with food and drink.

The three heroines were led to the thrones and invited to sit. Ashley lowered herself carefully, and Sarah took pains not to bump her bandaged arm. Then the entire room exploded with clapping and cheering. After several minutes, old Sister Rebecca stood up with the aid of her cane and everyone fell silent.

"Sister Sarah... Sister Ashley... and Sister Rachael. I honor you. You have taken Fear, Danger, and Death by the horns for your friend and fellow member. She is deeply in your debt, and you are wise to allow her opportunities to serve you."

Everyone applauded.

Sister Rebecca continued. "Please accept this moment of honor and celebration from those of us who could not be there to share your danger. Please accept our gifts and cards and words." She looked toward the serving

tables. "And please accept these culinary delights."

Everyone chuckled and the three honored guests smiled.

"But once you have been honored, remember that you are servants. Go back to being humble members of Lyceum, or whatever you choose to do with your lives. This moment of honor should be just that — a moment. You cannot draw upon it at a later time in lieu of doing the right thing at that time. You cannot keep the friend you saved in your debt for long without destroying her. Let your friend heal, let yourselves heal, enjoy this moment of honor, and then let it all become part of the past."

Again there was a hearty applause.

"You are all greater persons because of these events. The world will have need of you. Be well!" She turned and moved slowly back to her seat.

Ashley felt a warm glow, both because of the wonderful applause, and because of the wisdom she sensed in the words that Sister Rebecca had spoken. Before she knew what was happening, a table had been placed in front of their thrones, and servers were approaching them balancing trays and platters.

Sarah had expected to fill a plate from the trays that were approaching. Instead, the trays were simply left on their table for them to take as much as they wanted. And one of them, Sarah noticed, contained a cheesecake covered with a thick cherry glaze.

Rachael knew that her risk had been a different kind than either Ashley or Sarah had taken. She had risked being charged with murder. But then she remembered that the man's gun had been pointed in her general direction for a few moments, just before she had ended his life. She knew that pundits could argue forever about the morality of taking one life to save another. She knew what she thought about the issue, and she felt very honored to be part of the celebration.

Everyone in the room seemed to have words of thanks, or a card, or a gift for at least one of them. The gifts were generally small, but even so were starting to pile up beside their thrones. After making their bestowals and partaking of some of the food and drink, many members left, and more arrived as events ended or shifts changed. The gifts, cards, and kind words continued, and the three honored ones found little time to eat.

But eventually the line did reach an end, and all three dug into the goodies they had piled on their plates. A few moments later they became aware that one more person was approaching their table.

They looked up to see Jason holding three large, flat boxes.

"You saved the life of the girl I love. Thank you so very much. I hope you like these."

He handed a box to each of them. They scooted back their chairs and opened the boxes in their laps. Each box contained a top-quality brown leather jacket.

"Jason! This is beautiful!" Rachael said.

"I love it!" Sarah exclaimed. "Except... mine's a large."

"Mine's a small," Rachael said. "Let's swap. Do you have the right size, Ashley?"

"Yep! Thank you, Jason. I really love it too! You must have spent a fortune!"

"It was worth it. I love Liberty more than I ever thought was possible. If I can ever do anything else for you, I will."

"Your love for that special lady of yours is enough, Jason," Rachael said. "But if you find any spare time this evening, I could use some help putting up some more shelves in the Gallery workroom."

"You've got it!" he said.

"Blackberry needs her hooves trimmed..." Sarah said.

"Um... gosh... as long as you're there to keep her calm..."

Ashley just smiled. Seeing Jason's loyalty to Liberty was making her feel the intense need to call Tim, tell him what happened, and find out when he would be able to visit. But another part of her wanted to get the bandages off first.



Ashley was in a quiet and thoughtful mood as she ate lunch with her parents and Sister Heather at a restaurant near the airport on Sunday. Her inactivity had resulted in a poor appetite, and when they inquired if she was feeling okay, she replied in the affirmative, but knew she wasn't telling the whole truth.

She continued to ponder things as she saw her parents board the small

plane bound for Missoula, Montana. Her thoughts touched upon many things that were important to her, but they kept coming back to one particular subject: Tim.

By the time she got back to Lyceum, she had decided. If they were promised to each other, there should never be anything she had to hide from him. Not bandages, not anything. She found a free televideo booth and tapped in his number.

Ashley trembled inside when she saw that his mother had answered. "Is Tim home?"

"Um... Jesus... yeah. Just a minute. Tim!"

"Hi, Ash..." He froze the moment he saw her.

"It's just bandages, Tim! It's not as bad as it looks."

"Jeez, Ashley, what happened?"

"I tumbled through a window."

"God... why?"

"Because I had to. One of my best friends would be dead if I hadn't."

"Gosh... I always knew you were brave, but... wow!"

"I miss you, Tim."

"I miss you too, Ashley. I've been trying to figure out a time I could come see you, but with school and all these dance competitions, it's really hard."

"Can you come when school gets out? Or can I come visit you? I'll have the bandages off and be able to travel by the middle of June..."

"Gosh... I don't know, Ashley. My mom's pretty freaky about stuff like that."

"Stuff like what?"

"You know... medical problems."

"Tim! I got cut by some glass saving my best friend! It's not contagious!"

"I know. It's just... I don't know when I'll have time."

Ashley closed her eyes and bowed her head. She could tell by the tone of his voice, by the look on his face, that he didn't want a girlfriend who was... defective. She wanted to cry, but she wouldn't let herself. Not in front of someone who didn't care.

"Ashley, are you okay?"

She looked at him again, knowing it might be her last look. Her throat was

starting to tighten, but she knew what she wanted to say. “Yes, Tim, I’m okay. I know what it means to be a friend, and I know what it means to be promised to someone, and this isn’t it. I need you right now, but I don’t think you love me enough to come.”

Tim looked at the floor. Ashley had hit the nail on the head, and he knew it. “I’m sorry.”

She could only get out a whisper. “Me too. Good-bye.”

He didn’t say anything, so after a few moments, Ashley reached up and broke the connection. She sat there for a long time staring at the blank screen, not knowing what to do.

Then she remembered Shawn, and how much he cared about her, and she felt an intense need to be in someone’s arms, someone who loved her. She dashed out of the booth and ran across the Main Lobby, remembering him saying that he was going to work in his garden that afternoon.

She ran all the way to the Ecumenical Temple, which was not being used at that hour, and through its outer lobby toward the door closest to Shawn’s garden. But before she reached the door she stopped and looked out through the glass. There he was, just stepping onto the walkway, a bucket of tools in one hand. Ashley had never stopped to realize how handsome, how strong yet gentle he was. She wanted and needed to be with him, to be held and loved by him.

And then she saw Sarah come out from behind a tree and start walking with him, close by his side, and they were laughing and talking and were clearly very happy and comfortable together.

Suddenly Ashley remembered telling Shawn that it was obvious he and Sarah liked each other. That was a long time ago... weeks, or was it months or years ago? That was when she still thought she was promised to the boy she loved. She hadn’t understood Shawn’s loneliness. If she had, she would have been kinder and more comforting. Now she understood.

As Ashley stood there in the Temple Lobby watching Shawn and Sarah walk along the path toward her garden, a single tear rolled down her bandaged cheek. She felt an emptiness that she never before thought was possible. Shawn and Sarah were soon out of sight, but Ashley continued to stare at the scene before her for a long time.



Liberty and Tabitha were in a happy, talkative mood on Monday morning. Their friends gathered around them right after breakfast to hear about their Special Olympics adventure.

"You should have seen their faces when three of us arrived instead of just you, Ashley!" Tabitha said.

Ashley just smiled as best she could with bandages still covering parts of her face.

"Tabitha had to list all her ribbons and medals before they would believe she was a gymnast!" Liberty said with mock exasperation.

Tabitha giggled.

"How did you explain Sister Shannon Eileen?" Shawn asked.

"We said she was our chaperone," Liberty said and laughed. "We didn't tell them she was armed!"

"That's good!" Sarah said. "Was it fun?"

"Really fun," Tabitha said. "L... Nancy took the microphone while I did most of the gymnastics. I would coax them along if they were moving away from the podium, and Nancy would do it when they were coming toward her."

"Any problems," Jason asked, "for Shannon Eileen to take care of?"

"Nope!" Liberty answered. "We were careful about names, at the airports, the motel, the event, everywhere."

"Was it scary just having thin mats over a concrete floor?" Karen asked.

"A little, but Faelan told me what skills to avoid before I left," Tabitha said. "I only forgot and did a diving forward roll once. That was all it took!" she said, rubbing her neck which was still a little sore.

Ashley continued to just sit and listen. She felt happy that it had been fun for her two friends. But she was not in her usual bouncy mood.

"It was a little scary when we came to the end," Liberty said. "I explained to the head lady that if our work hadn't been close enough to what Ashley had done, there wouldn't be any charge. I could tell from her face that she would have rather had Ashley, but I also knew that the place had been packed and they had received healthy donations. She knew she didn't dare complain, or she might get nobody next year!"

Everyone laughed.

“So she said it had been wonderful, and I handed her the bill for six hundred and eighty dollars, which was about a *third* of what we spent.”

“You forgot to tell them about the boy!” Tabitha said to Liberty.

“You tell them! You’re the one who almost kissed him!”

Tabitha blushed. “Well... there was this boy. He was sixteen or seventeen, and he was really cute, and he kept standing right next to Nancy or me.”

Ashley was beginning to realize who they were talking about.

“He wasn’t like the others. He seemed normal. I couldn’t figure out why he was there. We danced together Saturday night, and he was getting sweeter and sweeter.”

A grin was slowly growing on Ashley’s face.

“I thought I was falling in love... until he started talking.”

“That’s when we figured out why he was there,” Liberty said. “He’s a real heart breaker until he opens his mouth.”

“Chad,” Ashley whispered.

“He was there last year?” Liberty asked.

Ashley nodded, still grinning.

“Did you go through what I did?” Tabitha asked.

“Worse. I was staying with them in the dorms. He came to my bed in the middle of the night and wanted to take me into the bushes. It was one of the hardest decisions I’ve ever made.”

“That was before you met Tim?” Liberty asked.

Ashley closed her eyes. Part of her wanted to tell them what had just happened with Tim. Part of her knew it would be hard on Shawn, who would then have to choose between two girls. She knew somewhere inside that Shawn would be happiest with Sarah. She opened her eyes and smiled. “Yeah. I met Tim about two weeks later.”

There were more questions for Liberty and Tabitha. Ashley was glad she hadn’t burdened her friends with her problem. But she was anxiously looking forward to telling Sister Heather all of her feelings.



After feeding and brushing the horses, Liberty checked her computer account to remind herself what her schedule looked like for that day. She found a message from Sister Ruth requesting that they get together for a

conference about the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty, that afternoon if possible. Liberty sent a message back confirming that two o'clock would be fine.

Off and on during her morning classes, Liberty wondered what she and Sister Ruth could possibly talk about that had anything to do with the Treaty. She knew, of course, that the only suspected motive of the two men who had tried to kill her was to influence her father somehow, presumably to get him to quit supporting the Treaty. But she herself knew very little about it.

She had lunch with Jason and Tabitha, but Shawn was at work in the Gallery, and Ashley was not around. Then she applied her mind to her Aeronautics class, the first hard class she had gone to since the murder attempt. It felt good to get back into her routine.

At two o'clock she dashed to the office and found Sister Ruth's desk.

"Hello, Nancy. Let's go find a quiet conference room. I have a proposal for you about a significant role you can play in the political arena during the next few months. Your father has already okayed it, but neither we nor he want you to do it unless you are completely comfortable with the idea..."

They entered a small conference room and shut the sound-proof door.



During the next two weeks, Ashley had to get used to a completely new routine. She met with Sister Heather almost daily to talk about her feelings about Tim and Shawn, and sometimes even about Jenny and others from the past. She spent much more time with Karen, and could now understand much better what the ex-gymnast, still unable to even walk, was experiencing. She went to all her academic classes, but gymnastics and dance were out of the questions for at least another month, and her childcare and kitchen shifts were being covered by others until she felt ready for them. She had considerable free time, and she spent much of it just being by herself.

Even before Ashley had returned from the hospital, the window had been replaced and the entire Residential Lobby had been recarpeted. All of the broken glass was gone, and no blood was to be seen anywhere. But she still paused every time she passed through, remembering what had happened, wondering if she would do the same thing if faced with the same situation again someday.

Her bandages had been off for almost a week at that time, and she was

beginning to see what parts of her cuts were going to heal, and what scars would remain. Liberty's father was adamant about paying for any plastic surgery that was needed, but Brother Kenneth had told her it couldn't be done until everything was completely healed and she was over her current growth spurt, all of which would take at least several months. Also, she had been told she couldn't do any serious gymnastics for a month or two after the surgery. After hearing all the limitations, Ashley decided to not even worry about it until after the Olympics.

As the weather improved, Ashley began spending more and more of her free time in the gardens. When other people were around, she would watch their expressions to see how close they would get before they noticed the scars on her face and neck. She discovered that some people stared (she liked those the least), some people turned away, and a few said comforting things. To those who had the courage to speak to her, she always returned words of thanks or a smile.

But when no one was around, as was usually the case early in the morning or late at night, she would sit and talk to certain trees, sometimes leaning against them, sometimes even hugging them. They became her friends, and she would tell them things she had once told only to Tim.

Ashley continued to wear the broken coin for two reasons. First of all, she didn't want Shawn to know what had happened, and her mentor, the only person she had told, was sworn to secrecy. And also she held onto a tiny bit of hope that perhaps someday soon he would change his mind and call, or even show up at Lyceum. But as the second week ended, that hope was fading.

As the last week of June began, Ashley was preparing for her first real vacation since coming to Lyceum. Her cuts had healed enough for most normal activities, and with Sister Heather's help, she had put the worst of her feelings about Tim behind her. She smiled when she remembered sitting down with Brother Hans a few days before to plan her vacation, and he had informed her that she was entitled to more of a vacation than round trip train and bus fare to Rapid City. He had listed some possibilities, and she had become excited when he had mentioned going north to Vancouver, British Columbia, where non-resident members could show her the city, and then taking the train part way across Canada, again meeting members in Regina,

Saskatchewan before heading south.

Her mind was brought back to the present as an elderly man sat down on the other end of her bench overlooking the pond in the European Garden. He looked vaguely familiar, as if she had seen a picture of him somewhere, but she couldn't remember where. He took in the beauty before him for a few minutes and then spoke while still gazing out toward the statue of Athena in her Greek temple. He had an accent that Ashley couldn't quite place.

"I can see that you have stories to tell, far beyond what anyone would guess from your years."

She looked at him. His eyes were bright, and his bearing was upright, almost but not quite proud. At once he made her think of a mighty king or president, and a simple, honorable old man. Then she remembered that she had seen him in the back row of the chapel at Mass the previous Saturday. But she knew she had seen him somewhere else as well. She too looked across the pond as she spoke.

"I've learned more and done more in the last two years than I thought I would in twenty years. But still there are so many things I don't understand."

He pondered her comment for a moment. "I could not have chosen better words to describe my own situation in the universe right now, Sister Ashley."

"How did you know my name?" she asked, looking at him with a curious smile.

"In much the same way that you are beginning to recognize me. When a person becomes an honorable servant of God, they become known, especially to other servants."

Ashley felt very close to putting her mental finger on who he was. She was starting to see images of fine, elaborate robes, beautiful religious paintings and murals, and crowds of attentive people. "I haven't quite figured out who you are, but I hope I've done what God wants me to. I had to do something a few weeks ago that... I'm not sure was right... but I can't see any way I could have avoided it."

"There is nothing more blessed than the willingness to give up your own life for a friend. Your life, Sister Ashley, and the life of the one who died, were both in God's hands at that moment."

"You know about what happened?" Ashley said with a surprised look on

her face.

“Yes, my daughter. And much more was at stake than lives, I assure you. Entire armies have perished to achieve what you did. From what I understand, the course of human history was in your hands at that moment.”

Ashley’s head dropped onto her chest. “But I’ve been taught all my life that killing is evil. How can I ever again be sure that I’m going to Heaven?”

Ashley didn’t see, but the old man closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them and smiled. “Confiteor Deo omnipotenti, beatae Mariae semper Virgini, beato Michaeli Archangelo...” he began in a soft, rhythmic voice, and suddenly Ashley knew. She had seen him on television, saying Mass for thousands of people at the Vatican. A wave of warmth and love and sadness, all mixed together, filled her and she quickly moved over next to him and looked into his eyes.

“... Ideo precor beatam Mariam semper Virginem,” he continued while looking into her eyes.

Ashley joined him. “... blessed Michael the Archangel, blessed John the Baptist, the holy apostles Peter and Paul, and you, Father, to pray to the Lord our God for me.” When she finished saying those words, she closed her eyes, even though tears were in them, and sat there trembling, feeling so lucky to be in the presence of such a great man.

“Misereatur vestri omnipotens Deus, et dimissis peccatis vestris perducatur vos ad vitam aeternam.” And when he had finished, Ashley felt him make the sign of the cross upon her forehead.

She opened her eyes and looked at him. She felt fresh and renewed, as if a great weight had been removed from her shoulders, a weight made of broken glass and human blood. Spontaneously she wrapped her arms around him and hugged him, giving no thought to whether or not such a thing was appropriate. “Thank you, your Holiness.”

“Shhh! Please, I am on vacation. My presence here must be our secret. Your security people know, of course, and my people are here also, but they are very good at not being seen.”

Ashley smiled. “I promise to keep your secret.”

“Good. And now, Sister Ashley, servant of God, will you perform the same rite for a tired old man?”

Suddenly Ashley felt very unsure of herself. It seemed to her that only someone very great could do what he was asking her to do.

"I am not worthy..."

"Perhaps not. Neither did I know if I was worthy to bestow a blessing upon you. You have already passed tests that I would have failed. If I cannot come to a child of God for a blessing, to whom can I go?"

She looked into his eyes again. They were soft and loving, but clear and wise. He had asked her for a blessing of forgiveness, just as he had given her. She knew she was not worthy, but neither could she refuse. With trembling lips she spoke.

"May almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you your sins, and bring you to everlasting life," she said, and then reached up and made the sign of the cross on his wrinkled brow.

He smiled. "Thank you, my daughter."

They rose, and hand in hand they walked the garden paths of Lyceum, sometimes Ashley leading the way to a favorite spot she wanted to share, sometimes their feet just guiding them this way and that. Now that she was aware of them, Ashley did glimpse his security guards ahead of them, or behind them, or just standing nonchalantly along the path. After sensing how well trained and dedicated they were, she said a silent prayer of thanks that she was on good terms with her companion.

Eventually Ashley realized it was getting late. "Please, Father, I have some money saved. May I have the honor of treating you to dinner?"

He looked at her, and he felt like crying. "It has been a long, long time since I have had dinner with a young lady. The thought makes my heart leap within me. You know how to make an old man feel young again."

Ashley giggled. "I've been feeling pretty old recently, too. But now I'm feeling better. If it's okay with you, I'd like to wear a dress to dinner."

"And I will buy some flowers at the Gift Shop, and we shall order all the tastiest things on the menu!"

Ashley grinned, and together they entered the Main Lobby, where other visitors were also thinking of dinner. She stopped at a computer screen, made their reservation, and then ran all the way to her room to change.



"You wouldn't *believe* the rhetoric that's been flying around the capital during the last few months," Senator Buchanan said from the video screen. "This is one of those issues for which *no one* claims neutrality."

"Oh, yes, I would believe it!" Liberty said. "I've seen some of it on T.V., and I'm sure it only gets worse off-camera. Has anyone tried anything nasty against you?" she asked with genuine concern.

"Not yet, but I must admit, I haven't been going on walks at odd times and places like I used to. Any sign of more trouble there?"

"Nope. Lyceum's being very careful with me. We've started to draft some of my speeches, and... I'm working on a little surprise of my own."

"What kind of little surprise?"

"You'll see, Daddy. But don't worry about me. Security's a lot tighter because of what happened, and for other reasons. The Pope was here for a few days, and even though his visit was *supposed* to be zero profile, Ashley discovered him, and you would have thought they were old friends. It really cheered her up, and she left for her vacation in a good mood. Are you coming out soon, like you promised?"

"You may not believe this, but the answer is *yes*. Some Chinese diplomats are flying home from Washington in two days on a small private jet, and the Vice President wanted a senator to accompany them across the country. I volunteered. We'll get into PDX early Saturday."

"Fantastic! I'm not sure Brother Fred will let me meet you at the airport, but I'll be waiting for you here! When you arrive, remember that my name is Nancy."

"Did you *have* to pick that name?" he said with a hint of sadness.

"I knew her before you did!"

"Slightly true. Anyway, my committee is about to reconvene. I know you're not big on religion, but if you ever find yourself praying, say one for me."

"I've been seriously tempted to try it recently. Please be careful, Daddy."

"I will, and you do the same."

The screen went blank and Liberty rejoined her security companion just outside the door.

"How's your dad?" Brother Don said.

“Good. He’ll be here soon, but I shouldn’t spread around when or how. You understand, don’t you?”

“Completely, and I compliment your discretion. Tabitha came by while you were on the line. Said she had to run an errand, and would meet you at the pool in about ten minutes.”

“So we’ll just walk slowly.”

“Sound’s good,” Brother Don said.

They made their way across the busy Main Lobby. Liberty knew which three of the two hundred or more people around her were Lyceum members on security duty, and she exchanged smiles when she passed near them, but knew they couldn’t stop what they were doing to talk. Soon she and her companion were walking along the glass-walled corridor that led to the Education Center and beyond.

They had crossed the next lobby and were just about to enter the passage to the Recreation Pavilion when two pairs of young feet came running down the mural-lined walkway from the labs. Sarah and Marty burst into the lobby and skidded to a stop, laughing and gasping for breath and slapping each other’s hands. Liberty knew how fast Sarah could move, and so suspected that she had avoided winning on purpose.

“Hi, Nancy!” Sarah said as soon as she noticed Liberty and her guard. “Have you met Marty?”

Liberty considered. She remembered that once someone had quickly told Marty her name in a group situation months before, but of course that was when she had had long black hair. There was little chance he would recognize her now. “I don’t think so,” she said, kneeling down to his level.

Hi, Nancy, Marty said telepathically, out of habit since he had been with Sarah for the last couple of hours.

Hi, Marty. Did Sarah let you win? Liberty said in her thoughts, not really realizing what she was doing.

Yeah. She always does. She’s fast! Marty replied.

Both Liberty’s and Sarah’s mouths fell open at the same time. Liberty had heard Marty’s telepathic greeting, but she was, by then, used to being able to receive thoughts projected by Sister Rachael or Sarah. It was the fact that she had successfully sent her own thoughts to Marty that startled both girls.

Neither Rachael nor Sarah had been able to hear Liberty's thoughts in the past.

Nancy! You're fully telepathic! Sarah projected.

Liberty was grinning from ear to ear and starting to spontaneously dance around in the Educational Center lobby. *Wow! This is so fantastic! I never dreamed I'd be able to do it! I am so excited!* She grabbed Sarah's hands and they danced in a circle together for a few moments. Other people in the lobby had no idea what they were so excited about, and a few strange looks were cast in their direction, but they didn't notice.

What's her problem? Marty asked Sarah as soon as they stopped.

Liberty answered. *I'm really excited and happy, Marty! I just spoke to someone telepathically for the first time! I could hear people before, but I couldn't project anything.*

With grins on their faces and sparkles in their eyes, they pranced over to some seats that were empty on one side of the lobby.

How long have you been telepathic, Marty? Liberty asked.

I don't know, since I came here I guess.

He was before, but he didn't have anyone to talk to, so it just got him in trouble, Sarah explained.

Marty, I've heard you're really smart, Liberty said.

Yep! You're really smart too. I can tell.

Being smart got me into a lot of trouble before I came here.

Marty wrinkled his brow in surprise. *You've been in trouble? I used to make people mad 'cause I would cry every time I found something broken. But Shawn told me how everything in the world is always slowing breaking. He called it entro... something. That's why we make new things.*

Shawn is very smart too. He's one of my best friends.

The silent exchange continued, and Sarah sat watching and mentally listening, as neither Marty nor Liberty were experienced enough to shield their thoughts from her. She could tell that both of them were being very loud and pushy with each other, but both seemed to be holding their own and just pushing right back. Her mind was starting to wander when one of Marty's thoughts caught her attention.

Nancy, who is Liberty? he asked.

Liberty was caught off guard. *Gosh... um... why do you ask?*

You keep thinking about her. She has black hair.

Um... yeah, she's a friend of mine, and she does have black hair. I haven't seen her for weeks.

Marty seemed satisfied, and went back to talking about other things. Sarah continued to listen, and realized that where she had been tip-toeing with Marty for months, Liberty was now dancing, even wrestling. She looked forward to telling Rachael all about it, and wondered if maybe Liberty and Marty could somehow help each other to refine and control their telepathic abilities.

After a few more minutes, Liberty remembered that Tabitha was waiting for her at the swimming pool. She said good-bye to Sarah and Marty, and with her armed companion at her side, continued on toward the Recreation Pavilion. But she was thinking about her father, and looked forward to telling him what she had just discovered she could do.



Chapter 12: Extreme Lobbying Measures

When dawn light began to creep into the sky soon after four o'clock in the morning that Saturday, everything at Lyceum was very quiet and very still. Sister Lynette was in the office doing some computer file maintenance, and Sarah had just recently headed outside with Brother Phil to accompany him on his rounds. They wore sweaters, but were looking forward to a sunny summer day. Brother Phil was carrying a small envelope.



Back in the office, the telephone chimed, and Sister Lynette worked at her computer screen to assemble a quote for conference center and laboratory use for someone on the east coast.

"...so that will be three breakfasts, four lunches, and three dinners, all standard quality?... all but the final dinner, deluxe quality... and you're expecting all sixty people at all meals?... okay... now if you'll tell me a little about your organization, I can probably figure in a discount... the Association of Industrial Chemists... so you are a non-profit organization for the exchange of information within your profession?... no, we're not bothered at all that you're not an environmental or social service agency... yes, in fact, the promotion of scientific understanding is one of our primary missions... you're welcome, and I can apply a twenty-five percent discount from our base price for these services, which brings you to nine thousand three hundred and fifty... yes, I would be happy to put that in writing, but also I notice that you are based in Baltimore. Are you aware that we can also provide you with this

entire package at our new Atlanta campus?... yes, this quote would apply to either location... okay, I'll get everything in the mail to you today. Thank you very much for allowing us to offer you these services.”

Within a few minutes after the call was complete, she had an entire packet of information sheets, brochures, and the printed quote, all in a large envelope ready to be mailed.



Out in the slowly gathering dawn light, Brother Phil quietly slipped the small envelope under the windshield wiper of the old van that had arrived in the parking lot about an hour before. Sarah smiled, and wished she could be there when the family asleep within discovered that they were being provided with two days of free lodging, meals, and fun things to do. A toy on the dash board had revealed to her that a child was probably inside. She wondered if she would be able to meet the young person, and whether or not they would be nice.



Sister Lynette's attention was drawn away from her computer by a weak and distorted voice coming from the radio console on the far side of the office. She rolled her chair over to it and listened intently. An indicator light told her that it was coming from the emergency channels scanner, and glancing at a chart on the wall, she could see that it was a private aircraft frequency. The speaker had a thick oriental accent.

“...explosion in engine two... pressure losing... Mayday... south of Mount Wilson... Secretary Qiaozhen... Secretary Liya... Senator Buchanan... Mayday... six thousand feet...”

Even as she continued to listen, Sister Lynette tapped anxiously on the keyboard in front of her until a map appeared on her screen that included Mount Wilson. She saw that it was in the Cascades due east of Lyceum, and she immediately realized that no possible source of rescue was any closer than she was.

“...try the pass... losing altitude... nowhere to land... Mayday”

She made her computer highlight all airstrips on her map, and could tell that if they were anywhere near Mount Wilson, it was a long way to the nearest one whether they made it over the pass or turned back into eastern

Oregon.

She listened to the desperate voice for a few more seconds, and then decided. Her fingers punched at the keys, her display screen changed to a bright red, and she quickly filled in the urgently flashing questions and menu selections.



Brother Arnold, the mountain climber with whom Shawn had ridden on the last leg of his shuttle from South Carolina, rolled over in his bed in Fantasia Hall to find his computer screen flashing and screaming at him. He rubbed his eyes to see better, and was finally able to make out the words on the screen. Out of habit gained from years of search and rescue work, his pants, shirt, and boots were right beside his bed, and he was almost fully dressed by the time he had read everything on the screen.



Liberty had already been awake, and as soon as her screen had informed her that two helicopters had to be airborne immediately, she tapped on the keys to inform the computer that she was ready and able to carry out her usual task of pre-flight mechanical checks in Port One. Her long legs carried her swiftly toward the Heliport, and she could hear other feet running not far behind her. She wondered what the emergency was, but had no way to find out at that moment. She would ask after the bird in Port One was away.

Liberty was the first one on the pad, and as she had practiced in her pilot training classes, her job was to open the passenger and pilot's doors, scan the cabin for anything unusual, and then jump back outside and start opening inspection panels and checking critical systems.

She had barely finished her cabin sweep when Brother Arnold and others started tossing bags of rescue gear in through the passenger door. They were obviously too busy to talk, so she focused her attention on the rotor linkage inspection hatch high up on the side of the helicopter.

"Emergency rotor start in thirty seconds unless you say otherwise!" Sister Erica yelled to Liberty as she ran for the pilot's door.

Liberty's mind raced. Visual inspection: everything in the hatch looked normal. Manual check: she tugged at the five critical linkages that should not have any play — they felt solid. Electronic: she pressed the diagnostics button

and watched the row of lights slowly change from red, to amber, to green. At that moment the twin jet engines roared to life, and she knew Erica was waiting for her word. She closed the inspection cover and quickly climbed down, flashing her teacher a thumbs up.

The rotor began to move, but Liberty still had three inspections to make. She had never done them before with the rotor engaged. An instinct inside her told her to dash for cover, but with an effort of will she ignored it. *I have plenty of time to finish my inspections before the rotor is up to speed. It's just wind. I can do it.*

She opened the first hatch. All of the hydraulic connections were tight and no leaks were evident. The pressure gauges looked good. She ran to the tail rotor and ripped open its hatch. Oil pressure was good, lights were green.

But to get to the last inspection point, she had to trudge through the rapidly increasing rotor wash, and it was threatening to knock her off her feet at any moment. She held onto the landing struts and pulled herself along, finally arriving at the helicopter's nose.

Liberty pressed the diagnostic button and did a visual inspection of all the pilot's control linkages while the electronics were doing their work. As soon as she had all green lights, she closed the hatch, stepped back a few feet so that Sister Erica could see her, and made the hand signal that meant all was ready for flight.

To Liberty's surprise, the pilot pointed at her, and then pointed to the empty co-pilot's seat.

Liberty felt unsure of herself, but saw that the gesture was repeated with redoubled urgency. With effort she forced herself through the swirling wind to the passenger door, which was still open a little, and Brother Kyle's strong arms pulled her inside. The door was slid closed, and a moment later the huge bird was off the ground.

Liberty looked around her. Brenda was there, securing two big medical chests. Arnold and Kyle were starting to open duffel bags of ropes, ladders, and other rescue equipment.

"Come on up, Lib. I need help with radar, and maybe later with visual references," Sister Erica said.

Liberty obeyed. As soon as she got into the co-pilot's seat, she could see

that they were flying at full speed toward the Cascade Mountains. She pulled on her seat straps and activated the radar monitor in front of her. “Nothing on the screen.”

“Recalibrate and wide-scan,” the pilot said.

“Sounds like they made it over the pass between Mount Wilson and Pinhead Buttes,” Sister Lynette’s voice said. “They could either head for Table Rock or try to come down the Clackamas River gorge. Either direction, there’s nowhere to land for a long way. If they head west, you should be able to pick up their signal soon. They’re on 112.75 megahertz.”

“Anything on radar yet?” the pilot asked as she set her receiver to scan the indicated frequency.

Liberty checked. “Nothing. Who are we rescuing?”

Sister Erica was silent. She had to make a choice between telling Liberty now, which might leave her upset for the entire mission, and letting her find out at a more critical time, which might be even worse for Liberty’s ability to make clear decisions. She decided to gamble on her student’s ability to deal with her feelings quickly.

“Your father. And I need you calm, cool, and collected in one minute flat.”

Everything her father had told her about his expected arrival flashed into Liberty’s mind. Small private jet. Chinese diplomats. *Please be okay, Daddy. Please, if there is a God up there somewhere, please let my Daddy be okay. And please help me to think clearly so I can help Sister Erica.* She could feel herself shaking inside, and her stomach might as well have been in a trash compactor. *I love you, Daddy.* “I’ll be okay. I promise,” she said to her pilot and teacher.

“K375 to K378,” Erica called. “Seems to me we’re going to have to flip a coin, John Michael. I’m inclined to go in over Table Rock, but then if they’re heading down the Clackamas gorge, we’re going to have a hard time catching up with them.”

“Agreed. I’ll swing north of Round Mountain. How many people are on board?”

“Unknown,” Sister Lynette’s voice said. “At least three named V.I.P.s and one pilot. My guess is there’s a co-pilot and a couple of aides.”

“The Chinese always bring several secretaries, and usually their wives and

children too,” Liberty said.

“Based on what Liberty just told me, I’m guessing eight to fifteen, John Michael,” Sister Erica said.

“Ouch. It’s going to be tough getting them all out unless we’re both there. I’ll be over Round Mountain in less than a minute.”

“We’re passing Table Rock now. Radar?”

“YES!” Liberty almost screamed. “Bearing eighty-six, elevation... oscillating from zero to minus one.”

“Got that, John Michael?”

“I’m coming, but I don’t like their altitude one bit. They’re going to have trouble getting over Fish Creek Divide.”

“I just lost them!” Liberty said. She looked up, and could see that a high ridge marched north to south directly in front of them.

“Yeah. That was Fish Creek Divide. Unless they’ve got some reserve power, which I doubt, they’re going to have to take the river. Let’s just hope they head north, or they’re going to be in a dead-end canyon before we can get to them.”

“I’m cresting the Divide now,” John Michael’s voice said.

Liberty could see the thickly forested ridge sweeping by less than a hundred feet beneath them. A helicopter could find places to land on roads or in rock quarries, but not a fixed wing jet.

“I’m coming over too,” Erica said. “Eyes on radar, Liberty.”

“Bearing forty-three, elevation minus fourteen!”

“I have them visually,” John Michael said.

“Thank God they went north,” Erica said.

“This is rescue K378 to aircraft in distress,” they heard John Michael’s voice say. “What is your status?”

The first few words they heard spoken were in Chinese, but the pilot quickly corrected his mistake. “One engine only, oil losing. Please, where we can land?”

All of those in the two helicopters and at Lyceum knew that the few words the Chinese pilot had spoken, if accurate, had just sealed the fate of that aircraft. They knew that a jet engine losing oil pressure was not going to last for long, definitely not long enough to get them to the nearest airstrip, much

less to an airport with crash and rescue equipment. And if that engine gave out within the next few minutes, they were not even going to have the luxury of landing on a relatively flat field or pasture. They would still be in the canyon with nothing but steeply wooded slopes in every direction.

"Aircraft in distress, prepare for in-flight evacuation," John Michael said from the other helicopter.

"I no understand."

"John Michael, I have visual contact now," Sister Erica said. "Let me talk to him."

"Give it a try, Erica."

"Pilot in distress, bring Senator Buchanan into the cockpit."

"Okay, we bring."

While they waited for the senator to get to the radio, precious seconds ticked by. John Michael's bird was about thirty seconds ahead of Erica's, and both were slowly catching up with the crippled jet, but much too slowly.

"You know what we need, Liberty," Erica said. "I'm going to have to concentrate on flying."

"This is Senator Buchanan. Can you hear me, rescue craft?"

"Daddy, this is Liberty. We're going to get you out of there, but we need you to take charge of things on that end."

"Okay, Honey. I'm sure glad to hear your voice, but I'd feel better if you were on the ground."

"Thanks for the concern, Daddy, but we don't have much time. There are no air fields you are going to get to in time. You have got to talk the pilot into slowing down to the lowest possible speed. Erica tells me that with full flaps you should be able to come down to about seventy knots."

"I'm on it."

During the silence that ensued, Erica and John Michael conferred. The lead helicopter was still two minutes behind the little jet at its present speed.

"He was reluctant, but I finally convinced him it was the only way. Our air speed should be dropping."

"It is," John Michael said. "I'll be with you in less than a minute."

"Now you have to get the front passenger door open and get everyone ready to use the rescue ladder, two at a time, arms through the loops."

"I'll do my best. It's not going to be easy. We have five men, three women, and two children."

"I'm almost on top of them," John Michael said. "We're deploying the ladder."

Liberty and Erica could see the helicopter ahead of them descending to within feet of the small jet. Its one working engine was starting to smoke. Suddenly the jet's forward passenger door opened and was immediately torn off its hinges by the force of the wind. They could see the rescue ladder come down right across the open door until it was dangling well below the plane. Then it clung to the side of the aircraft, just below the door.

"Successful attachment," John Michael said.

"Come on, folks, let's get on the ladder!" Erica said more to herself than anyone else.

Just then the canyon they were following curved sharply and the pilot was forced to bank.

"We're passing the bend just downstream from Roaring River. Stay with them, John Michael," Erica said.

And they saw that he did stay glued to the smoking aircraft, and as soon as the pilot had leveled out, the first pair of people grabbed the ladder. It looked like a man and a child. The helicopter began to pull the ladder slowly upward, the ladder sliding through its attachment brackets.

Another man and child grabbed the ladder just beneath the first ones, and then a man and a woman below them. The jet's pilot and John Michael negotiated another curve in the canyon, but before they had leveled out, the jet's remaining engine suddenly burst into flames.

The jet veered and the rescue ladder's brackets were torn away from the doomed aircraft.

"Daddy!" Liberty screamed, knowing he was still in the jet.

"Clear out, John Michael. Let me get in there and get the last four."

"You've got less than a minute, I figure. Good luck. I'll meet you at the old scaling station." He lifted his helicopter well clear of the powerless jet plane with six people clinging desperately to the rescue ladder.

"Daddy, another ladder is almost there. Get ready!"

"The pilot is doing everything he can, but the plane is starting to stall," the

senator's voice said.

"Get on the ladder, Daddy!"

"Ladder is there," Brother Arnold yelled, "but the plane is bucking so much I don't think it will attach."

Then Liberty saw through the viewport at her feet that two people were on the ladder. But neither one was her father. *Please, Daddy. Please get on the ladder.* Erica raised the helicopter, and another hand reached out and grasped the ladder.

Suddenly the plane began to drop. Erica tried to stay with it, but was unable to get the ladder back to the door for more than a second. The river was curving again hundreds of feet below them, and a tree-covered ridge was directly in front of them. Erica knew how little control a pilot would have over a plane of that type when it stalled. She tried desperately to stay with the plane, but the ridge was approaching fast. With barely enough time left to stop the forward motion of her own rotary wing craft, she yanked back the stick.

Both those inside the helicopter and those still holding onto its rescue ladder watched helplessly as the small jet slammed into the tree-covered wall of the canyon. Sister Erica said a silent prayer of thanks that it hadn't burst into flames, that the brave pilot had had the presence of mind to dump his fuel after the last engine failed.

They hovered for a moment, perhaps out of pure shock and horror at what had just happened, perhaps out of respect. Then Erica remembered that she still had people on her ladder, so she turned the helicopter and headed for the meeting place.

Liberty didn't know if the third person had gotten onto the ladder. When they were hovering, the first pair was blocking her view, and now that they were moving, she could not see the ladder at all. She felt grief and horror rising up inside her, but she was determined to not let it take her, not there in the co-pilot's seat, not before she knew for sure.

To hold down her fears, she focused on what Sister Erica was doing. She had just programmed in a new radio frequency.

"Emergency, calling anyone."

"This is the Estacada Ranger Station. What is your emergency?" a stern

female voice said.

“I’m up here on Clackamas River Road doing some fishing, about a mile upstream from the Memaloose bridge, and I just saw a plane crash into the side of the mountain.”

“I’m dispatching a ranger. Please identify yourself. The Clackamas is closed to fishing this time of year.”

Sister Erica reached up and touched the fine-tuning control until she was half-way to the next channel. “Sorry, but I couldn’t hear you.” Then she cleared the frequency entirely.

A moment later they were slowly descending into the large parking area of an old log scaling station. Liberty could see the other helicopter ahead of them, its rotor already still, the six people it had rescued being helped inside by Brother Kenneth and others. Erica continued to slowly land, and the people on the rescue ladder let go as soon as they were on the ground and just laid there, not daring to try to stand up under the hurricane force of the rotor wash. A smile flashed onto Liberty’s face and the breath she had been holding was released when she saw that the person who had been lowest down on the ladder was her father.

Erica moved the bird several yards away from the three people on the ground and set it down. The rotor began to slow, but no one waited. The side door was slid open, Kyle and Arnold jumped out and Brenda handed them a medical kit, then jumped out herself. Liberty was not far behind.

Liberty ran past the others and was the first one to arrive at her father, who was just starting to pick himself up off the ground. “Daddy! Are you okay? Please be okay, Daddy!” she said in a voice close to both panic and tears.

“Yes, sweetheart, I’m okay,” he said and took her into his arms. “I’m shaking all over, and I just had the wildest ride of my life, but I’ll live.”

Sister Erica approached Liberty and her father. “Senator, I hate to cut this short, but rangers are on their way, and we need to decide if we should be here or not when they arrive. Was this an accident, or are we dealing with an attempt on your life?”

Senator Buchanan took a deep breath. In any other situation, a helicopter pilot would not be involved in such a decision. But these were Lyceum

members, he reminded himself, and this pilot had more brains than most of his Senate colleagues. His mind raced as he realized the political implications of what had just happened.

“There was a small explosion that took out the first engine. Then things started falling apart that had no connection to each other.”

“If someone wanted you dead, there are advantages to letting them think they succeeded,” she said.

The senator considered. If they thought he was dead, they might show their hand enough to reveal their identity. And he would be safe for awhile, especially if he secreted himself away in one of Lyceum’s hidden corners. After what he had just experienced, he longed for that safety more than at any time he could remember.

“I think we should not be here when the rangers arrive.”

“Let’s go!” Erica shouted.

Half a minute later they were all securely inside the helicopters, the rescue ladders had been stowed, the doors closed, and the rotors were starting. Sister Erica spoke with her fellow pilot over the radio.

“Let’s head up Fish Creek, over the ridge toward Wheelstone Mountain, and then around south of Table Rock.”

“Good plan,” Brother John Michael’s voice said. “But let’s take it slow and easy. My passengers are shook.”

“Good point. Mine too. “

The two rotary wing aircraft lifted off the ground at about the same moment, and Sister Erica led the way into a side canyon that headed south. On the flight back to Lyceum, Liberty sat with her father while Brother Kyle took the co-pilot’s seat. Brenda tended to the needs of the two Chinese diplomatic aides, which mostly consisted of lotion on minor scratches, blankets, and cups of warm herb tea. Brother Arnold carefully inspected and coiled the rescue ladder, and bagged all the equipment they had used.

“Sorry about calling you by the wrong name a couple of times back there, Nancy,” Sister Erica said after they had cleared the canyon and were crossing the divide toward the Molalla River.

“That’s okay. I’m not sure I could have remembered either one for a while there.”



Senator Buchanan was very quiet and thoughtful on the Helicopter flight to Lyceum. Not many weeks before he had experienced the attempted murder of his daughter, his only child. Now, all evidence suggested, he had just survived an attempt on his own life, and the perpetrator had been willing to also kill nine innocent people and create an international incident to accomplish his goal. And even though he himself had survived, the pilot had died, probably still in his cockpit seat trying desperately to control his doomed airplane.

And he was glad Sister Erica had been thinking quickly and clearly back at the log scaling station. Now he had the option of letting the perpetrators think they had succeeded. He could sit back at Lyceum, watch the broadcast coverage of Congress, get in touch with a couple of highly trusted friends in Washington, and see who was most overjoyed that the senator from Pennsylvania appeared to be deceased.

But then he realized there were some problems with his plan. There were many people who would be glad the congressional leader of the treaty ratification process was out of action, even though they wouldn't actually wish him dead or have anything to do with a murder attempt. And in a few days the rangers would be announcing to the media that they had found only one body in the wreckage. With ten people known to have been on board, that would be too few to convince the perpetrators that they had succeeded, even if he stayed out of sight. Still, it might be long enough to allow him to glean some information from the situation.

A large part of his mind was telling him to protect his daughter and himself at all cost. But every time he paused to realize what that would necessitate, completely abandoning his efforts on the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty, he stopped himself, thinking of the millions, possibly billions who would die if a war was ever fought with nuclear weapons. Maybe, he began to think, this was why he was alive, and why he had become a U.S. senator. Maybe, he even admitted to himself, this was also why his daughter was alive.



It was almost six in the morning when they finally landed back in the safety of the Lyceum Heliport. All of the Chinese diplomats, along with their

families and aides, were extremely gracious, thanking their pilots and crews, and the members who assisted them in the Heliport. From there, members who spoke Chinese showed them to Lodge rooms, and returned for them after they had rested and cleaned-up, escorting them to the Garden Dining Room for a late but elegant breakfast.

By the time they had landed at Lyceum and the Chinese diplomatic team had been guided toward the Lodge, Senator Buchanan had decided. "I think I'd like to hang around for awhile, if you and Lyceum don't mind."

"Daddy, you are welcome here *any* time!"

"Can you arrange for all your members to know that my presence here should be kept secret?"

"No problem! We do it all the time for kings and bishops and people like that who want a vacation. I'll take care of it right away."

"But I'd rather not use a hermitage cabin this time. I'd rather be... closer to you. I'm not sure how much longer... either of us is going to be alive," he said, looking at his daughter with eyes that weren't entirely dry.

Liberty wrapped her arms around her father. "I love you, Daddy. We're going to be okay. But I've been thinking, ever since... you know... they tried to kill me. Things as big and important as the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty don't become reality without sacrifices. Two people died here, and one in that jet, and Ashley and Sarah have scars. If I have to lose for the Treaty to win... I'll be able to handle it."

A tremendous wave of pride filled the senator. "You are a very brave girl, Liberty."

"Nancy."

"Um... right. I'm going to do everything I can to get the treaty passed, and I'm going to try to stay alive and keep you alive in the process. I'm very glad you're here at Lyceum. It would be much harder to protect you at a school or at the country house.

"You know," Liberty said, looking at him, "there are several empty apartments in my residence hall. You could stay in one of them while you're here, and you wouldn't have to go out into public areas unless you wanted to."

"That sounds very nice, but don't you have to check with someone in charge before you make promises like that?"

“Daddy, sometimes you seem to fit in so well here that I forget you’re not a member, and at other times you don’t seem to understand Lyceum at all!”

He smiled, and his daughter grabbed his hand and yanked him in the direction of the residence halls.



Late that afternoon, the two Chinese diplomats approached the Main Office and stepped up to the counter where Sister Carolyn was helping people.

“May we please arrange to speak with an executive officer?” one of them asked respectfully.

Sister Carolyn knew that she had as much authority to handle their needs or complaints as anyone else, but she also knew that most people in the world were not used to such organizational structures, especially those from traditional cultures. She knew just who they would feel comfortable talking to.

“Yes, I can get someone for you.” She queried her computer, and within moments knew where the intended person was and how soon he could get to the office. “May I show you to a conference room?”

“Thank you.”

Sister Carolyn led them to a small but pleasantly decorated room with comfortable chairs and couches, and by the time she had made them cups of tea, Brother Li stepped into the room.

“Greetings, gentlemen. How may I serve you?”

Sister Carolyn finished placing napkins beside each of their cups and stepped out the door, pulling it closed behind her.

“It is we, and our wives, children, and aides, who should be asking that question. We are deeply in your debt, even though we mourn our pilot who died valiantly.”

“We mourn with you. I saw Sister Erica at prayer today, and I know she feels badly that she could not rescue your pilot also.”

“We do not hold her at fault. My aides who flew in her helicopter tell me they have never seen such skilled piloting before. I say the same about the pilot in our helicopter.”

“Brother John Michael.”

“Yes. Please convey our deep thanks to both of them. We owe them our

lives.”

“I accept your gratitude, on their behalf. I also realize that the possibility exists that your plane was sabotaged by some political faction of this country in order to attempt to kill Senator Buchanan. For this possibility, I am ashamed, and I am in your debt for the loss of your pilot, and your aircraft, and for all the distress and inconvenience you have experienced.”

The two diplomats looked at each other for a moment. “We appreciate your shame, but we release you from any debt you feel. Your country is wide and diverse, and you cannot be responsible for the actions of all your people.”

“Thank you, but we would be honored if we could at least provide for all your needs for as long as you can stay, and then provide transportation for your entire party back to Beijing. We have studied the matter, and believe it would be safest for Senator Buchanan if you would allow us to convey you to Vancouver, British Columbia in one of our helicopters, from where several different airlines are available to convey you home. We request this course of action, but we will respect and facilitate whatever course you choose.”

“We would be happy to help Senator Buchanan by taking the course of action you suggest.”

“Thank you. I wish to show you a very special place, a part of our Hall of Shrines that I believe you will find comforting. And after that, I beg your company for dinner, at any fine restaurant you wish.”

“We would be most honored,” the diplomat said, bowing his head in recognition of the wisdom and graciousness Brother Li was showing them. “Is there a restaurant somewhere in the Portland area that serves pizza?”

Brother Li smiled.



The Chinese diplomatic team stayed at Lyceum for two more days, honoring their deceased pilot in the sections of the Hall of Shrines devoted to Confucianism and Taoism. None of them had ever been to Lyceum before, and they were constantly amazed and delighted by the treatment they received and the service they saw provided to others, from world leaders to children from Portland’s poor north side. As they prepared to depart, they left donations from their personal funds, and promised to try to return soon, and to recommend Lyceum to others in their government who were passing

through the Pacific Northwest.

Both Liberty and her father asked to be able to accompany the team to British Columbia. It was their way of honoring the pilot who had died when the real target had been, most probably, the senator. They carried luggage, poured drinks, and helped to entertain the children. Sister Erica piloted, sharing in their guilt in a slightly different way, going over and over in her mind what she could have done differently that would have resulted in everyone coming out alive.

They all shared a last meal at Vancouver International Airport, Sister Erica took care of their tickets, and they waved good-bye to the departing diplomatic team. They felt they had made some new friends, and only wished it hadn't required so much death and destruction to accomplish.



The following morning at Lyceum, Senator Buchanan found his daughter in a leotard and tights, stretching and warming-up.

"Well, well! What a beautiful young lady I helped bring into the world! You're not going to try to stand in for Ashley at the Olympics next year, are you?"

"That would be impossible, Daddy!" she said with a slightly embarrassed smile. "I have my own training to do, and my teacher is expecting me in about five minutes. I have a lot of work to do, as I haven't done much dancing in two whole years!"

"So where's your first performance going to be?" he asked, mostly in jest.

"New York," she said with complete earnestness.

He looked confused.

"You'll see, Daddy!"



Chapter 13: An Auspicious Vote

The sky dawned cloudy and gray one morning in early July, the morning after Marty returned from his monthly trip to his home in Los Angeles. He and Sister Joan had headed off into the woods for a long walk right after breakfast, a daypack filled with snacks on Joan's back, a much smaller pack bobbing along on Marty's back, magnifying glass and specimen jars inside. They both wore light raincoats.



At 8:32 that morning, Lyceum's computer network received its first request for information on Marty Jelwen. Some of the members of Lyceum had a small amount of information in their computer files marked as being open to the public, and of course the computer could go to the Internet to reference any book or article ever published, and just about anything in the public domain. But since this particular request was from a public terminal, and nothing in Marty's file, not even his name, was marked as public information, the computer pleaded ignorance. It also made a note of the fact that the request had been made.



At about 8:45 a mist was starting to fall. A sweet little lady entered the Main Lobby and approached the Information and Assistance counter claiming to be from the county Health Department and asking, ever so nicely, if she could cross check a list of children residing at Lyceum with her list of children who were behind on their vaccinations, for the purpose of providing them

with certificates good for free shots. The brother who was on duty asked, equally as nicely, for her to wait in the little lounge beside the counter while he looked for that information. He sat down at his terminal and began to skim all the entries in the Lyceum Constitution, and its associated policy and procedures statements, that had anything to do with vaccinations.

During its nearly quarter century of operation, Lyceum had already learned well that it was generally not wise to simply deny information to someone who thought they were entitled to it, no matter how solid a legal footing was the basis for that denial. Lyceum had seen too many times how tenacious a government bureaucrat could be when pursuing information they were used to getting from institutions with lower confidentiality standards. Methods had been developed to satisfy requests such as the one facing the brother in the Information Center, and yet to preserve the privacy of the members and associates of Lyceum.

A few minutes later the sweet little lady had in her hands a list of children who lived at Lyceum, their status in regard to fourteen different vaccinations (only five of which were of concern to the county Health Department), and the signature of Dr. Kenneth Partlow on the bottom of the sheet, attesting to the accuracy of the information. In the column entitled *Patient** was nothing more than a ten-digit identification number. At the bottom of the sheet, the asterisk was explained: name and other personal information could be released with written, notarized parental consent obtained by the requester and verified by Lyceum.

She was smart enough to realize that she wasn't going to get any further that way. She smiled, thanked the brother sweetly, perhaps too sweetly, and left. The computer recorded the fact that a request had been made about a group of people that included Marty Jelwen. That was two requests in less than twenty minutes.



A few minutes after nine o'clock, a courier service van pulled up to the shipping and receiving dock behind the Production and Maintenance Complex. A man hopped out and held his clipboard over his head to ward off the light rain that was falling.

"I have a package here for Mr. Martin Jelwen. Do I have the right

address?”

“I’ll take a look,” the brown-haired sister in a hooded yellow raincoat said. She knew very well that Marty was on campus, as she had just discussed cretaceous paleontology with him at breakfast that morning. She also knew Lyceum’s confidentiality ethics like the back of her hand.

She could have just accepted the package, any package, for anyone who was or wasn’t at Lyceum. It would have gone to the mail room to be claimed or not, and if not, then it would have been returned to the sender if possible. But since the driver wanted confirmation, even just verbal, that the addressee was actually there, certain procedures came into play.

She accessed Marty’s status screen, immediately saw that no permissions had been given to reveal anything about him to anyone, including his presence at Lyceum, and strode back to the courier. “Sorry, I don’t have anyone by that name in my records. You can leave it if it’s just address-specific.”

“It says here, *From Daddy*. Are you sure he’s not here?”

“So many people come and go, he could be here, but just not on my list,” she said in a nonchalant tone of voice.

“Okay. Well, I guess I’ll just have to return it,” he said, getting back into his van and spinning his tires on the wet pavement as he headed for the exit.

That was the third request the computer had received for information on Marty in thirty-five minutes. A pre-programmed threshold had just been passed.



At ten o’clock that morning, a man in a sopping wet trench coat came to pick up his five-year-old daughter at the Children’s Program room where he had left her two hours earlier.

“Carla, were you able to play with your friend Marty again, that really smart little boy?” he said in a fairly loud voice in full hearing of the members on duty.

The girl obviously knew what he was talking about, but looked uncomfortable. “Um... no, Daddy, he wasn’t here. What does he look like? I forgot.”

“You remember! He had strawberry blond hair. Excuse me, Miss?” he

said, calling to one of the members on duty. “My daughter was wondering if a little friend she made here not long ago happened to be around. His name was Marty, and he was really bright for his age.”

Sister Heidi did indeed know who Marty was, and knew he had been at breakfast that morning, as she had been helping with the serving and remembered his squeal of joy when the platters of blueberry muffins had been brought out. But a red light was flashing in her head after hearing the incongruence between the man’s expectations and his daughter’s responses.

“Marty... the name sounds familiar. I’ll check.” She stepped to her computer and accessed Marty’s information. Immediately a red box appeared, informing her that a security alert was in progress, and reminding her that everything about Marty was strictly private information. After recovering from her momentary double-take, she decided the best thing was to tell a trimmed-down version of the truth.

“Yes, a little boy named Marty has been here off and on this year, but I haven’t seen him in the Children’s Program today. Perhaps the next time you see him,” Sister Heidi said, stooping down to the little girl’s level and speaking to her directly, “you and he could exchange addresses.”

“Thank you. Can we go now, Daddy?” she said, looking up at him.

He hadn’t given up. “Is there any way you can help Carla get in touch with her friend? They had such a good time together.”

Sister Heidi glanced at the little girl, and could again see that look of discomfort on her face. It was the look of someone who was confused... and maybe a little disappointed in someone they loved.

“I’m so sorry!” Sister Heidi said almost melodramatically. “We don’t keep the addresses of visitors in our files.” That statement, also, was true enough. But she felt sympathy for the little girl, and anger at the man who was using her for some hidden purpose.

“Oh. Okay. Let’s go, Carla,” he said, took his daughter by the hand, and pulled her along more quickly than she could comfortably walk.



By 10:30, a security team in heavy raincoats had trudged through the pouring rain and located Marty and Joan deep in the woods along one of Lyceum’s little streams. They were almost completely dry, sitting under a

fallen log, looking at their specimens of bugs and plants and talking about biochemistry.

Another team had managed to get the license plate numbers of some of the vehicles driven by those with an unexplained interest in Marty, just before they had departed in haste. Those vehicles turned out to be rented. Lyceum could learn no more about them without a court order, and since no crime had yet been committed, that was not possible.

A report about the incident was presented to Marty's parents the next time they were on campus. They were concerned, but didn't quite know what to make of it all. Eventually, as Lyceum seemed to be well equipped to protect their little prodigy, they ceased to worry about it, and figured that it had been a series of coincidences or persons looking for some other child named Marty.

But Sister Heidi never forgot the look on the little girl's face. The little girl had obviously never met Marty, but Sister Heidi had a hunch that if they ever did meet, she would have no part in helping anyone to hurt him.



Senator Buchanan was enjoying his time at Lyceum, but was growing more restless with each passing day. A little voice inside him seemed to be trying to tell him that time was short. He discovered exactly how short as he sat watching the evening news in the lobby of Terrabithia Hall on the third of July.

"A last minute procedural motion in the Senate today moved up the final vote on the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty from next week to tomorrow. Speculation on the fate of the Treaty is running wild now that its primary sponsor, Michael Buchanan of Pennsylvania, is missing and presumed dead in a plane crash in the Cascade Mountains of Oregon. The scheduling of the vote on Independence Day is being looked at by some as a possible victory for opponents of the Treaty. The New York Stock Exchange closed today with most indicators holding steady or slightly up from yesterday..."

He quietly stood and slipped out the door, suddenly feeling the need for some cool air on his face. He felt hot and angry and sick. After sitting down on a bench and leaning his head against one of the wooden posts of the covered walkway, he closed his eyes and tried to will his body to relax, his mind to cease its dire thoughts. After several minutes, he began to feel better.

Liberty was off helping Jason with his animals, and the senator was glad. He harbored untold guilt already for the stress and danger his political life had brought to his daughter. She didn't need any more of his worries. But he had to try something. He had invested too much of his energy, and his political reputation, in the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty. He had to try, one more time. He stood up, steadied himself on the post for a moment, and then began to walk toward the Residential Lobby. He had never before felt so shaky.

At that hour there were plenty of free telecommunications booths in the Main Lobby. He entered one, opened a Portland phone book, and tapped in the number of the first airline that had flights to the east coast. It was already after ten o'clock at night. He knew it was the habit of the Senate, when in session on a holiday, to convene at about nine a.m., and try to finish their business by noon.

"Hello. I need a seat on a flight to Washington, D.C. that will get me there by eight o'clock tomorrow morning."

"We have a flight boarding right now, scheduled to depart in fifteen minutes, and I have one free seat."

"I can't get to the airport that soon. Anything else, to anywhere on the east coast?"

"We have a flight to New York at 6:15 tomorrow morning, arriving at 11:30 eastern time."

"Thank you anyway."

He called other airlines, and found flights that were already over-booked, flights that would get him to Washington too late, and flights that would get him to the east coast by nine a.m., but not to the national capital.

After finishing the last call, he lowered his face into his hands and let his despair take him, sobbing deeply and letting his body start shaking again. He knew there was nothing else he could do, that he could not get to Washington by the time of the vote, and that without him, a number of senators who had been wavering could easily change their minds, especially now that it was being held on the holiday devoted to sovereignty and nationalism. It wouldn't take many, and the Treaty would not be passed by the Senate, and it would not go to the President's desk. And as soon as the United States of America

turned its back on the historic document that hundreds of diplomats and world leaders had been nurturing for nearly a decade, then other countries would back away, and soon the world would be right back to pointing nuclear weapons at each other.

Senator Buchanan was still crying softly when Liberty slipped into the booth and put an arm around her father. She had been looking for him for almost half an hour. Without any attempt at composure, he told her, through his sobs, what had happened, and what the result would probably be. He felt completely lost, totally helpless, and unconditionally defeated.

Liberty started crying right along with him. She knew how important the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty was to her father, and she knew he had just invested the vast majority of his time and energy in it for more than a year. She felt his pain, and seeing him so defeated was almost more than she could bear.

Liberty, of course, was not paying any attention to the fact that she had just recently grown into her ability to project her thoughts telepathically. Sister Rachael was at her easel, had lowered her brush, and was rapidly becoming aware of the entire situation. As soon as she was sure she understood what had happened, she reached for her pager.

“This is Hans.”

“Brother Hans, I think we need to arrange some emergency transportation. Will you please meet me in the office?”



By the time Rachael and Hans had determined that what they hoped to accomplish was actually possible, ten minutes had passed, and Liberty had talked her father into joining her for a cup of tea in the Dining Hall. Hans remained in the office to work on the arrangements while Rachael strode up to the table where father and daughter sat. She grabbed another chair from an adjacent table and joined them.

“What I am about to propose will require a great leap of faith, Senator, and I must admit that there are still parts of the puzzle that have not been worked out, but if you can be ready to leave in a few minutes, we are going to do our best to get you to Washington by tomorrow morning.”

A surprised smile crept onto the senator's tired, tear-stained face. “But...

how did you even know?"

Rachael looked at Liberty.

Liberty bit her lip and her eyes opened wide. "I think it's my fault, Daddy. I haven't yet learned to shield my thoughts from Rachael and Sarah."

"And it's a good thing, in this case," Rachael said. "You can accompany your father on the first leg of the journey, if you want to, Liberty. A helicopter will depart Port Two as soon as you get there, and take you to the Bend-Redmond airport, where a private plane will fly you to Boise. We'll give you further details as soon as we have them arranged."

All three stood up and the senator shook Sister Rachael's hand vigorously. "Again, I am in Lyceum's debt."

"We'll worry about expenses later. Liberty, would you run into the kitchen and throw some snacks into a bag for your father? Do you have any belongings in your room, Senator?"

"Just a few things I've picked up since I arrived. I'll grab them, wash my face, and be at the Heliport in two minutes or less. Will you meet me there, Lib?"

"Nothing could stop me from going with you on that helicopter, Daddy! I wish I could go with you all the way to Washington, just to see the looks on people's faces when you show up for the vote."

"Sorry, Liberty. This trip is going to be expensive enough as it is," Rachael said. "I'll meet you both at the port in two minutes."



After returning from the flight to eastern Oregon, Liberty didn't even try to go to bed. She was too excited, too anxious. She stayed in the office most of the time and hovered around Brother Hans as he made the transportation arrangements for her father. Sarah was also in and out, bringing drinks and snacks for Liberty and Hans before prancing off to see what the night security team was doing.

In Boise, Senator Buchanan caught a midnight commercial flight to Denver, where a non-resident member met him at about two o'clock and drove him to a smaller airport where a twin engine charter plane was being made ready by its pilot. The member brought out an envelope full of cash, the pilot's wife counted it, and Senator Buchanan used the pay phone to get

further instructions from Brother Hans and exchange encouraging words with Liberty.

On the long flight to Chicago, the senator spent considerable time pondering how it was that Lyceum could achieve such efficient and effective operations without any of the hierarchical structures the rest of the world needed. But he was too tired to come to any conclusions. The engines produced a comforting hum, and he fell asleep several times, but usually woke up when the pilot or his wife began rummaging in their huge ice chest for something to drink that was high in caffeine.

Dawn light was in the sky as they crossed the Mississippi River, and the sun was rising when they landed at O'Hare International.

Again he spoke with his daughter and Brother Hans, and was informed that all flights to Washington, D.C. were booked, so he needed to catch the 6:30 flight to Richmond, Virginia. The final leg of his journey was still being arranged. He opened his mouth and started to ask for assurances that he would be able to get to his destination in time, but stopped himself, remembering that Brother Hans and Lyceum didn't have to be doing any of this. He took a breath, recalled that Sister Rachael had spoken of a leap of faith, and went to pick up his ticket.



Back at Lyceum, Brother Hans was having a problem. None of the possible routes from Richmond to Washington were going to get the senator to the Capital Building in time. The best scenario had him screeching into the Senate parking lot at about 9:45, and that was in a taxi that had been willing to run all the red lights.

The plane the senator was on was only about half an hour from landing in Richmond when Brother Hans suddenly laughed out loud. Liberty rushed to his side, but his only explanation was to turn to his computer and request the business directory for Virginia. After a few moments of study, he had found what he sought. Liberty was surprised to notice that the business he was calling was not in Richmond, but in Norfolk.

"Good morning. This is Swamp Choppers. We're running a special this month on coastal flights," a cheerful female voice said.

Brother Hans had been up all night and had no intention of dancing

around the issue. "Can you get a helicopter to the Richmond Airport in half an hour?"

"Well... er... let me ask the boss..."

A minute of silence ensued. Brother Hans knew he had been put on hold. Finally a husky voice spoke.

"This is Gary Lynch. I understand you need a helicopter at the Richmond Airport right away."

"That's correct. To pick up one passenger and transport him to the Capital Building in Washington."

"You know, I've had requests like that before, and they've come from some pretty shady characters, so now I have a policy of not transporting anyone to a government building without knowing who I'm dealing with."

Brother Hans didn't like dropping names and titles, but he couldn't think of an alternative. "This is Dr. Hans Peterson. I am a diplomatic advisor to the United Nations. You will be transporting Senator Michael Buchanan."

"Of Pennsylvania? The one who was believed to be dead? The one who was pushing that controversial treaty?"

Brother Hans suddenly felt himself start sweating uncontrollably, and he could almost hear his own heart pounding. He realized that he had walked into a trap. If Gary Lynch was in favor of the Treaty, Senator Buchanan would get to Washington in time. Otherwise...

"Yes, that's correct," he forced himself to say.

"And the vote on the treaty is happening this morning, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"By God, I wish we had more like him. I've never seen such courage in my life. And I can't understand people who want to go back to the nuclear fear we had in the last century. I'd be happy to give him a ride!"

"I can have someone meet you at the airport with whatever payment you need," Brother Hans said.

"Don't worry about it! Send me a check for five hundred to cover my fuel, and I'll be happy. Besides, I'll get lots of free advertising with my chopper sitting there on the landing pad at the Capital Building."



Senator Buchanan landed in Richmond, Virginia about fifteen minutes

later, called Lyceum, and learned that he had enough time for a quick doughnut. Ten minutes later he was shaking the hand of Gary Lynch and climbing into his bright green six-seat helicopter.

It was a refreshing change approaching the national capital by air from the south. The senator saw landmarks he had never noticed before, and knew that whatever happened on the Senate floor that day, he would be in desperate need of a vacation soon. He toyed with the idea of spending a few days at some nice little inn somewhere in the Virginia countryside.

But that would have to wait until the vote was over. The House had already passed the Treaty, and he knew the President was anxious to sign it. The Senate, his Senate, was the only unknown. The Potomac River below them slowly narrowed its banks as they approached the national capital.



At 9:03 eastern time, Senator Michael Buchanan stepped out of Swamp Chopper's bright green helicopter onto the paved surface of the landing pad behind the Capital Building. He thought for a moment of all the effort and expense it had taken to get him there in time. He was dressed in casual clothing, hadn't even brought a tie, and needed a shower and a shave, not to mention a meal and a good night's sleep, but all of those things would have to wait. The vote came first. He strode toward the main doors of the capital, doors he had walked through many times. But this time, going through those doors would have an extra special meaning.

The Senate was already in session when he stepped into the chamber and began to walk down the aisle toward his seat near the front. He could tell that everyone was still getting preliminary remarks out of the way, and that no votes had been taken. A murmur of surprise ran quickly through the room when the other senators saw him. He walked to his seat slowly, making eye contact with his party colleagues and smiling as best he could, even sending some of them a thumbs-up signal.

"The clerk will add the honorable senator from Pennsylvania to the roll, as he is obviously no longer missing, and clearly not deceased."

Laughter and welcoming grins greeted the new arrival on his side of the aisle, while on the other side reactions were mixed, with some faces looking rather disappointed.

“My apologies for being tardy,” he said in a loud, clear voice as he sat down.

“You are forgiven... this time,” the majority leader said. “We’ll take up a collection later so you can properly attire yourself in the future.”

Everyone laughed, and Senator Buchanan smiled.



Because Lyceum was committed to facilitating the work of the United Nations and other international organizations, it had been involved in many aspects of the negotiations that had resulted in the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty, even long before Senator Buchanan had called his daughter looking for a place to hold the conference that the United States had sponsored earlier that year. The attack on Liberty Buchanan at Lyceum, and the rescue of Senator Buchanan in the mountains nearby, had only added a personal note to Lyceum’s already strong relationship to the Treaty.

On Thursday morning, July 4th, at shortly after six a.m. Pacific Time, Senator Buchanan entered the Senate chamber, but only a handful of members, including Brother Hans, Liberty, and Sarah, witnessed the event on the broadcast channel that carried Senate proceedings.

But as the morning progressed, many visitors came to Lyceum on that summer day of clear but slightly cool weather, and many members had to be on duty to help them with everything from childcare to laboratory procedures. Wherever a member could be near a computer screen, part of that screen was tuned into the proceedings. Regular visitors noticed a slightly slower response time than usual in their needs being met, as members were constantly having to drag their eyes and ears away from their screens to tend to their duties.

By the time the Senate had been in session for two hours, the debate was in full swing, several amendments to weaken the Treaty had been proposed, and rejected, and the words and phrases being uttered were starting to sound less and less civilized. Senator Buchanan had not yet spoken.

As 11:30 passed in the Senate Chamber, nearly everyone had used up their allotted time.

“Does the senator from Utah wish to use her time?”

“Thank you,” she said, stepping to the podium. Then she took her time

organizing her notes, letting the silence lengthen, almost unbearably. “Thank you for your patience, fellow senators. I wanted to make sure I had my thoughts collected, as I don’t want to use my time repeating the points others have already made. What I want to say to you is going to be somewhat difficult for me, and you will understand why in a moment.” She paused to clear her mind and shuffle her papers again. “Most of my constituents have asked me to vote against this treaty. My friends and family have not bothered to ask, they have simply assumed that I would vote against it. My church has obliquely instructed me to do everything in my power to defeat it.

“But as I sat alone last night, reading over the treaty and many other things, I became aware of something. The clock on my desk was moving. And I’m sure it will come as no surprise to any of you that it was moving forward. I began to think about the future. For the next three hours I let my mind wander into the years and decades that lie ahead of us. Not many of those will I personally see, of course. But they will be there for my children, my grandchildren. What I am about to say may cause this to be my last term in political office, but if that must be, then it must be.”

A number of displeased murmurs began to be heard — on the lady senator’s side of the aisle.

“I was unable to envision a positive future for our world that did not include the governments of the world someday becoming one, allowing us to speak and make decisions with one voice when appropriate. And when it comes to nuclear weapons, our world has been speaking with one voice for a while now, and that voice keeps saying: *we dare not use them ever again*. That is why I will be casting my vote in favor of this treaty which will place all nuclear weapons on our planet under the control of the United Nations.”

With a brave and stern look on her face, she collected her notes and stepped down from the podium as a disbelieving roar ran through her side of the room, and an applause rang out on the other side.

It was another minute before the chamber was again calm. “Does the senator from Pennsylvania wish to use his time?”

“Thank you,” Senator Buchanan said, stepping to the podium wearing the same casual clothes he had been in for more than twenty-four hours. “I will keep my remarks brief, because the honorable senator from Utah has spoken

so eloquently.” He paused to think, and realized he could very easily fall asleep if he didn’t keep his mind focused. “Most of you know that I have a sixteen-year-old daughter. A few weeks ago, she learned that she was going to have a very special role to play in the politics of nuclear disarmament. She learned that her life could be snuffed out at any moment just because she was my daughter.” A rumble ran through the chamber. “Two young girls, ages nine and thirteen, saved her life on that occasion, and it cost them scars they will be able to show for the rest of their lives.

“But I am very proud to say that my daughter is taking the bull by the horns. If this treaty is ratified and signed by our President, she will be leaving immediately for several foreign countries that are still unsure, and she will be symbolically offering her life, and the lives of all other young people, so that the leaders and people of those countries will know for whom we ratify this treaty.

“It is not for old men like me. It is for her and her young friends, and their children, and their children’s children. Neither is it for those who would have us destroy all nuclear technology and pretend we don’t know how to make the Bomb, because someone would just re-invent it sooner or latter. It is an equitable compromise, fellow senators, allowing us to keep the Bomb, but to keep it in a locked box, a box we can open again if need arises.”

He paused and looked down at the podium for a moment, wishing he had notes. But only the intricate wood grain of the podium’s surface was available for inspiration. He took a deep breath and forced his sleepy mind to focus one more time.

“I trust you will all vote as your conscience dictates. I leave the fate of this valuable document, and perhaps the fate of the world, in your hands.”

He stepped down from the podium and returned to his seat. Everyone had used their time, and it was 11:55.

At Lyceum, indeed all over the country, and to some extent all over the world, eyes were on the Senate of the United States of America. The vote was taken, slowly and carefully, as the roll was called. For the three minutes the procedure took, all services at both Lyceum campuses came to a halt.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the Senate, I count seventy-two affirmative votes, thirty-two negative votes, no abstentions, no absences. Senate Bill

5003, The Nuclear Disarmament Treaty, is sustained by this Senate.”



All over both Lyceum campuses, there was elation tempered by the knowledge that the visitors they were in the process of serving might not share their opinion of the Treaty. The real celebration would take place that evening in the residence halls. At the time of the vote, Liberty was at her Children’s Program shift, supervising a group of six to eight-year-olds.

“Do you think the Treaty is a good idea, Nancy?” one of the oldest asked her.

“For a long time I wasn’t sure,” she replied. “But you know how we keep the sharp scissors on an upper shelf in the supply cabinet?”

“Yeah... so the little kids can’t get to them.”

“Right. I guess it’s sort of the same. We might need our bombs someday to move an asteroid that’s heading toward us, or something like that. But we can’t leave them laying around for people to play with.”

“I see what you mean. Are we going to get to see a planetarium show today?”

Liberty smiled and nodded.



Chapter 14: A Very Trying Mission

The President of the United States signed the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty, surrounded by cabinet secretaries, congressional leaders, and the media, on Friday morning at nine a.m. Senator Michael Buchanan, by then rested and properly attired, stood off to one side, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible.

He felt very drained, in a way that would not be cured by sleep or a vacation. He knew, deep inside, that this was his moment, his crowning achievement, but he felt no desire for the limelight. Perhaps he would continue to be a senator from Pennsylvania for a long time, but he was already considering ways in which he could gracefully step out of some of the leadership roles he held.

He was especially glad of one thing. Now that the Treaty vote was over, he and Liberty were probably out of danger. It would be of no benefit to anyone to kill either of them now. And indeed, although he didn't know it, his daughter was at that moment, while watching the signing ceremony on the small screen in her room, preparing to dye her hair to as close to her natural black as she could, looking forward to the day when her own hair color and length had completely returned to normal.

Even as her father was thinking of vacations and fewer responsibilities, Liberty Buchanan, a member of an international service organization dedicated to facilitating the work of the United Nations, was painfully aware that many more countries had to ratify the Treaty in their congresses or

parliaments before their delegates could all come together in the General Assembly and make it a reality. She had been working with Sister Ruth and others for almost five weeks to see how the attempt on her life could be turned to good. That assassination attempt had become general knowledge in diplomatic and governmental circles, and the symbolic meaning of her name had not been overlooked. Lyceum had waited until the stories were well circulated, and had then sent offers to fifteen countries, those who were still in the treaty ratification process, for Liberty to come and meet with them, and address their leadership in either English or Russian, or in other languages through interpreters.

Seven governments had accepted, and even though Lyceum did not know it at that moment, five more requests would closely follow the ratification of the Treaty by the United States. Liberty had less than a week before she would be leaving.



Early the following week, Liberty had made up her mind about something. She quickly finished feeding and brushing the horses, and was waiting in the corridor when Shawn came out of Christianity class.

“Hi, Liberty!” he said, sensing that something strange was afoot.

“Hi, Shawn. I have a very big favor to ask.”

“Well... I’ll do whatever I can,” he said as they wandered into a small nearby lounge.

“You know I’m about to leave for a bunch of foreign countries...?”

“Seven of them. I bet it’ll be exciting!”

“It’s up to nine. And I’m scared shitless.”

Shawn realized by the tone of Liberty’s voice that she was very serious. He hadn’t considered the possibility that the trip would be hard for his friend. “Gosh... people are going with you to help out, aren’t they?”

“Yeah. A whole team is going, including two U.N. people. And Sister Ruth said I should take a special friend, someone I really trusted, someone who would be there just for me. I need you to come with me, Shawn.”

Shawn’s mouth opened, but no words came out for a moment. “Um... but... what about Jason?”

“Jason is really busy with animals this time of year, and... how do I say

this..." she said, looking at the carpet, "...I love Jason very much... but... this is going to be a very hard mission, and... I need a friend along, not my boyfriend. Do you understand?"

"I think so. You need someone who won't make any demands of you, 'cause you'll be putting all your energy into the mission."

"I know I'm being selfish..."

"You are being *anything* but selfish, Liberty! You almost gave your life for the Treaty, and you still might. I could *never* do what you are about to do!"

"I still don't know if I can do it. I'm just going to go, and try."

Shawn could see the pleading look in Liberty's eyes as she waited for his answer. He swallowed, and then said a silent prayer. The feeling of courage that filled him was unmistakable. "You're my dear friend, Liberty. If you need me to walk down this road with you, I will, just as Ashley and Sarah were called to protect you."

"Thank you. I know I'm not thinking very far ahead right now. I can't afford to. I just have to concentrate on surviving this mission. We're going completely unarmed, and if anyone wants to shoot me, they'll be able to."

After a few minutes, they joined hands, and walked together to Procedures class, not caring what anyone thought, not even sure themselves what they were doing, but knowing it had to be done.



Two days later, it was a solemn group of four Lyceum members who made ready to depart. Sister Keiko was along to interpret French, Italian, and Japanese. Brother Caleb would provide German, Hebrew, and Arabic. The diplomats who would join them in New York would cover Hindi and Chinese, and help Liberty with Russian.

In one part of the Residential Lobby, Jason held Liberty tightly, and she promised to call often to let him know that she was still alive. In another part of the room, Shawn and Sarah sat beside each other.

"I think it's really great that Liberty had the courage to ask you to go with her," Sarah said.

"I hope I won't be just excess baggage. The only thing I can speak is Greek, and *they've* already ratified the Treaty."

"You're going to be very important to the success of the trip, I just know it."

Be brave, Shawn. Do whatever you need to do to help Liberty, and don't worry about what anyone else thinks."

"I'll try. Wish me luck!"

"We'll all be thinking of you!"



By the end of the day, they were in New York, and Liberty spent the evening with her father, talking over dinner, and just being glad of each other's company as they strolled back toward the United Nations from Park Avenue. The night was warm and muggy, and the city around them was alive with lights and sounds of all kinds.

The next day was spent in planning and briefing meetings at U.N. Headquarters. Liberty tried to pay attention, but it all started to sound the same after awhile. The number of countries that had accepted Lyceum's offer was up to ten, and Liberty started crying right there in the briefing room when she heard that news. Shawn comforted her while everyone else took a break. If anyone could have replaced Liberty on the mission, they never would have asked her to endure the stress. But on this occasion, no one else could fill her shoes.

At the diplomatic reception that evening, at which Liberty was the guest of honor, she did a very good job of being gracious and polite with everyone. But every fifteen or twenty minutes she went to find Shawn, and just laid her head on his chest and trembled while he held her tightly.

Liberty was fine the following day as they flew across the Atlantic, seeming to be a carefree teenager again, enjoying the movies and the meals, playing cards and reading magazines. But the following day a routine began that was to last for the next twelve days. Starting with the British Parliament, she would speak at the allotted time, answer a few questions, try to enjoy the exclusive tour of the capital city that was almost always provided, attend a reception or state dinner, and then in the evening, catch a plane to her next destination.

She was glued to Shawn between each activity, and sometimes had to take breaks during a long question and answer session when things became too heavy, too personal. Sometimes when they were together, she would talk rapidly and nervously and he would just listen. At other times she would curl

up in a chair next to him and stare into space with glazed eyes. He found that at those times, it helped to tell her a story, some silly little thing from his laboratory shifts or his Children's Program work. But there were plenty of occasions when she was already crying as he wrapped his arms around her and guided her off to a relatively private corner.

Every time Liberty had to retreat from the diplomatic spotlight, she would bounce right back after five minutes, ten minutes, at most half an hour, and be ready to speak, answer questions, or shake hands again.

France, Germany, and Italy came and went. They continued on through Israel, Saudi Arabia, and India, and Shawn noticed that the stress was starting to wear on Liberty more and more, especially after they received word that two more stops had been added to the list, bringing the total to twelve. As they dragged themselves through Australia and Japan, Liberty's tendency to burst into tears at odd moments was becoming more and more obvious.

They were in Australia when Shawn first woke in the middle of the night to find Liberty standing beside his bed, trembling like a leaf even though the room was pleasantly warm. She managed to say something about a bad dream, and then started crying. He took her hand and gently drew her into his bed, where she curled into a fetal position and whimpered as he pulled the blanket back over them and wrapped an arm around her. Ten minutes later she was fast asleep.

In Japan and China, they both put aside their discomfort and accepted the fact that they were going to sleep together for the rest of the trip. Liberty needed the closeness, even when not troubled by strange dreams of private jets with smoking engines, and Shawn was experiencing one of his deepest fantasies come true. He lay awake many hours during those nights, cherishing the fact that he was, for the first time in his life, sleeping next to a girl, one who was his dear friend, and who was, to him, very beautiful. They both noticed that her moods were somewhat stabilized by their new closeness.



When they finally arrived in Ukraine, Liberty was living very much in the present. If she had been asked, she would not have said that she was unhappy. She had grown used to the daily stress, the speeches, the questions, the diplomatic receptions, the trembling and crying in back rooms, the

comfort of Shawn's arms around her at night. Lyceum, the United Nations, and even her father, seemed distant memories of things far away and long ago, things that she wasn't sure were real anymore. The only things and people who were real were those around her, and the only completely reliable thing in her life was Shawn, always there whenever she needed him.

That evening at the reception, she looked at him, and he was so handsomely dressed, so gentle but at the same time so strong, that she let her feelings run freely. She stood there grinning like a silly school girl, allowing herself to become completely infatuated. Doing so let her completely forget the stress and the seriousness of their mission, and she felt wonderful for the first time in... she had no idea how long.

As soon as she felt no one else had expectations of her, she pulled Shawn off toward their room, and he wondered what was up, because she was in such a happy, giggly mood. She joyfully got ready for bed, and as he was genuinely very tired, he did the same. And as soon as he sat down on the bed, she sat down beside him and started kissing him.

It wasn't what he had imagined. It wasn't the slow, sensuous kisses of a lady with many romantic experiences. It was the clumsy, spontaneous pecks of a young girl in love, and he quickly found himself drawn into the moment and kissing her back just as clumsily, just as spontaneously.

Their bath robes fell from their shoulders, and they didn't notice or care, and were soon touching each other's warm bodies with craving hands. And soon Shawn heard the words he had dreamed of hearing for more years than he could remember. And he was so happy those words were coming from someone who was his precious friend, someone he knew, someone he cared about.

"Love me, Shawn. Take me. Do anything to me you want!" Liberty said even as she laid down on the bed and pulled him onto her.

And Shawn did love her, again and again and again. He gave her everything he had been saving up for a long, long time. And they loved each other yet again with complete abandon, not worrying about who might care, or what might happen tomorrow. Only the present moment existed for them, only their need to feel completely loved, completely accepted.

Finally he had no more to give, and he lay with her and they were both

quiet, with an occasional whisper or giggle passing between them. As Shawn lay there enjoying the contented feeling that filled his body, he knew he loved Liberty, as he had for most of the year he had known her, but he somehow also knew he couldn't keep her. She was too beautiful, too perfect. He could comfort her now, and perhaps for the rest of the mission, because she desperately needed it, and he, for a different reason, needed it too. But he couldn't keep her, and he realized with surprise that he wasn't sure he wanted to keep her. As best he could discern, it was God's will that he had come along to comfort Liberty, and he was glad he had been able to do that in all the ways she had needed. But he had a strong hunch it wasn't God's will that they be more than dear friends in the end.

Even as Shawn pondered these things, Liberty fell asleep. He joined her after rolling many questions around in his head for which he had no answers.



Liberty was up before Shawn the following morning, and Sister Keiko was in the room helping Liberty with her dress when he awoke. He hurried to shower and dress, and was barely ready in time for the state breakfast. It was their next to the last stop, and Liberty seemed to be refreshed and re-energized. Shawn was glad. He too felt happier than at any other time during the mission.

After completing the usual routine of Liberty's speech, state receptions, guided tours, and fancy meals, they said good-bye to Ukraine that evening and headed for Moscow. After the entire team shared a pleasant evening walk with snacks at a street cafe, Liberty took Shawn to bed and made love to him in ways he had never imagined possible, and he soon fell into a deep sleep in her arms.

The following morning, Liberty prepared to give her talk for the last time. Although it had common threads with the words she had spoken in other countries, it had been specially prepared to take into account the history and culture of one of the greatest nations on Earth. She needed no interpreter to deliver her message there in the Russian Parliament, and she was glad, for she had felt more at home in Moscow ever since they had landed than anywhere else in the world they had been.

"Zdrastvuitia! My name is Liberty. My name means 'freedom,' and I have

the great honor of being a small part of this moment in history. But the freedom to live and act also brings with it the freedom to die.

“And so it is that those who want us to continue pointing nuclear bombs at each other wanted me to die. But with the help of many people, who now carry wounds and scars for my sake, I am alive for a little longer so that I may humbly enter this great hall and share with you a few words from my heart...”



Ashley stepped off the last evening van to Lyceum and stood on the curb gazing at the sight before her, that magical place nestled in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains that she had come to think of as home. Lights twinkled in many of the trees, and the illuminated walkways invited exploration of the Theme Gardens, while signs beckoned toward the Playground and the Petting Zoo and the Amphitheater where, her ears told her, some musicians were playing. Children darted up and down the walkways and across the lawns, adults strolled quietly or sat on benches gazing at the glorious sunset colors in the sky, and members were out making sure everything was clean and presentable.

She felt fresh and rested, and she saw the campus with renewed sight, noticing things she hadn't paid attention to for months: the color of new growth on the fir trees, the way reflections played in the Welcome Center's glass walls, the patterns of different colored bricks that made up the passenger loading area.

“Good night, Sister Ashley!” the driver said as he prepared to take the van back to its garage.

“Good night, Brother Jeff! It sure is great to be back!”

The van drove off, and Ashley picked up her suitcase and walked through the Welcome Center's archway. She stood looking at the fifty or sixty people who could be seen in the Plaza, or on the steps to the Main Lobby, or going in and out of the gardens. They had come to Lyceum for many different reasons, but they all looked relaxed and happy. And she realized she was a part of that happiness every time she danced in an inspirational service, worked in the kitchen, coached gymnastics, or helped with the Children's Program. She was a part of that happiness when she worked in her garden or interpreted for French-speaking people. She was even a part of that happiness every time she

answered a question for a visitor, or helped someone with their luggage.

During her vacation, it had been hard for Ashley to get used to the fact that no one needed her to do anything. Her mother was so used to making all the meals, that she would seldom let Ashley cook. Her father wasn't comfortable with Ashley doing any heavy yard work, as he felt it was his responsibility. So she had planted a few flowers in a forgotten corner of the yard, done as much of the house work as her mother would allow, and spent much time going on short walks with Julie and long walks alone.

Ashley walked across the Main Plaza, suitcase in hand. The members who saw her smiled and waved. Most of the adult visitors ignored her, just as most people generally ignore each other in public places. A teenage boy looked at her and began to smile, but when she got close enough, he quickly turned away.

She had gotten used to that reaction during her vacation. Never again would she win people over just with her pretty face and her irresistible grin. Her face wasn't pretty anymore, it was as simple as that. She knew that cosmetic surgery would help a little, allow them to get closer before turning away, but most of them would still, at some point, turn away. The most painful example had occurred at the grocery store in Rapid City. She had attempted to help a lady who was dropping her bag, only to have the lady scream and accuse Ashley of trying to steal her groceries. That was when she had started going on long walks alone.

Suddenly Ashley became aware of someone running up behind her. She turned, and saw a skinny little girl of about eight years standing there.

"Aren't you Ashley Riddle?"

Ashley searched the girl's face. It showed no negative reaction to her scars. "Yes. How did you know?"

"Gymnastics Championships. I was there in San Francisco. We just moved to Portland. I want to be a gymnast. Who's the best coach around?"

"I don't know the coaches in Portland. Coach Faellan's the best here, but he doesn't do public classes."

"Who does?"

Ashley felt refreshed by the girl's courage. It made up for all the adults who didn't see her, and even the boy who turned away. "I coach one class,

and Tabitha does another. Sister Shannon helps us out.”

“Could I be in your class?”

“Maybe. If you want, I’ll get you the papers about our public classes.”

“I do, I do, I do!” she said, jumping up and down.

Ashley grinned, and they entered the Main Lobby together.



There was an incredible amount of news to catch up on, and Ashley started that very evening. Reading through the messages in her computer files, she learned that Liberty and Shawn would be back in three more days. She smiled when she read that Liberty had discovered she was fully telepathic. Other messages referred her to reports that filled her in on the rescue of Senator Buchanan, and the increased security for Marty. As soon as she felt sufficiently enlightened on recent happenings, she dashed over to Fantasia Hall to see what Karen was doing, and if she would like to go on a walk or get a late snack.

Ashley was very happy to get back into her routine on Monday morning. She had already started conditioning again, and was looking forward to feeling the mats under her feet and the bars in her hands. After an unexpected hour of interpreting and helping a French Canadian family get settled in the Lodge and Dining Hall, she and Tabitha were crossing the Main Lobby on their way to classes. Ashley spotted Brother Chad pushing a large cart stacked high with hundreds of disk cases.

“Hi Chad. I just got back from vacation!”

“I’m going to take one soon myself. I think I finally got this disk production business going smoothly.”

“What are these?”

“You haven’t heard, have you? Well, we did some basic advertising of Jenny’s *Back To The Stars...* press releases, catalog listings, and the like. We always do that for Hospice Center materials, to whatever extent is appropriate based on the subject matter. It seems that word started spreading like wildfire. Radio stations are playing it, music clubs are offering it, and critics are talking about it everywhere. We’re shipping out over five hundred copies a day now, and rising.”

“Wow! That’s fantastic! Can we copy it fast enough?”

“Just barely, and we had to buy some new equipment recently to keep up. Several members are working on it as a special project. It’s going to be a long time before Jenny Clark is forgotten on this planet! Thank you again for bringing her into the Hospice Program.”

“And thank you for everything you did, Brother Chad. We have to head for class.”

“You young ladies take care!”

They were halfway down the passage to the Education Center when Tabitha said, “There’s something else happening that you seem to have started by getting that silver medal.”

“What?”

“We’re getting bunches of applications from gifted kids who want to do gymnastics.”

“But I didn’t get it that long ago! I bet some of them saw us at the Chunichi Cup, and so Karen and you get more credit than me.”

Tabitha smiled. “Let’s call it even. There are a couple in the evaluation group next week, and I’m on the team.”

“Great! That reminds me... I have to do my one-year evaluation next week.”

“Scared?”

Ashley thought about it for a moment as they approached their classroom. “No. Compared to going through glass windows, it sounds pretty tame.”

Tabitha burst out laughing, put her arm around her friend and fellow gymnast, and together they entered the classroom.



Liberty and her support team arrived back at Lyceum on Wednesday afternoon. Many people were in the Residential Lobby to welcome them when the van pulled in from the airport. Ashley had taken a break from the gym to greet her two dear friends. Jason was in the room, and Ashley could tell that he had really missed Liberty. Sarah was there too.

As soon as Liberty and Shawn walked in the door, Ashley could tell that something had changed. They weren’t holding hands, but they might as well have been. And they kept glancing at each other longingly, and then glancing away with worry in their eyes.

Finally Liberty saw Jason. She froze, trying to hide behind Shawn without actually moving. Jason smiled at her, and she took a step toward him, but an invisible tether stronger than steel would not allow her to leave Shawn's side... not yet.

Ashley knew. Their pain was similar enough to something she had experienced. She guessed that the mission had been very stressful, and that Liberty had needed Shawn to comfort her in more ways than she, or he, had imagined when they had left. Ashley was sad for them, not for their love, but for the pain they now had to endure.

Liberty was moving toward Jason again, but glancing back at Shawn. Jason was beginning to guess what had happened, and he was no longer smiling. But Ashley knew he was about the gentlest boy who had ever walked the earth, gentler even than Shawn, if that was possible, and would not react with anger. Liberty knelt down at his feet and bowed her head. Ashley felt for her, but would not have taken her place for any amount of money.

Shawn was left standing in the middle of the room alone. For a few moments his eyes followed Liberty, but finally he looked away. Ashley was glad. Liberty and Jason would need plenty of privacy and respect to begin their healing process. Then Ashley happened to see Sarah, and could tell that tears were on her cheeks. It occurred to her that Sarah probably knew everything that had happened, as she could hear all of Liberty's thoughts. And a few moments later she witnessed one of the bravest acts she had ever seen, far braver, in her opinion, than the deed she had done in that same room a few weeks before.

Sarah stood up, as tall and confident as she could make herself, dried her tears on her sleeve, and walked to Shawn, facing him at an angle that caused him to look even further away from Liberty.

"Would you like to see the new flowers in my garden?"

"Yes, very much," Shawn said in a tone of desperation, glad for anything that would give him a good excuse to leave the room.

Ashley smiled to herself as Shawn and Sarah turned and walked out the door. Their hearts were both young, Ashley thought, and they would soon heal. But she wasn't so sure about Liberty and Jason.

Ashley wiped away a tear that had somehow gotten onto her own face, and

headed back to the gym.



Two days later Ashley was eating lunch with Liberty. She knew that Liberty and Shawn had been avoiding each other, and wondered if their days as three friends were over. She hoped not, and had a hunch that the question lay in Jason's hands, in his ability to forgive Liberty, and accept the fact that her feelings for Shawn predated their own relationship, and were never going to go away entirely, especially now that they had been lovers.

"How's it going in the gym?" Liberty asked.

"Good, but I have a lot of work to do. Faelan thinks I'll be back at my skill level in about another month and a half. Then I can start getting ready for the Olympics."

"Can you have a nice floor routine ready in three weeks?"

"I suppose, except I won't be able to do some of my hardest tumbling skills."

"That's okay. An emphasis on dance would be fine."

"What's up?"

"A little something I'm putting together. I'll tell you about it next time we're out in the gardens. I want to keep it a secret for right now."

"Okay. What sort of music do you want me to use?"

"Something bright, triumphant, hopeful..."

"I know just the thing! I'll play it for you this evening."

"Thanks!"

"Are you and Shawn going to be friends anymore?"

Liberty was silent for awhile, biting her lip. "Um... I guess I gambled, Ashes. I wasn't sure Jason could give everything I would have to ask for on that trip. I wasn't sure it was fair to ask him to try. And I knew Shawn could do it, except I didn't know I would have to ask for..."

"That was your mistake."

"Yeah. I see that now. But by the time I realized it, we were halfway around the world. I don't think I'll make a very good diplomat. I can't take the stress, like you can. On the way home, I was really torn. I might have been pregnant with Shawn. And he's such a sweet guy. But then I remembered what I felt like last winter when I learned I wasn't pregnant with

Jason when I thought I might be.”

“You were devastated!”

“Yeah. And that told me something. I found out at our stop in New York on the way back that I wasn’t pregnant. And on the flight back to Portland I made myself a promise. I was going to ask Jason to forgive me, and if he wouldn’t, I was going to ask Shawn if we could stay together, and either way, I was never, ever going to gamble like that again.”

“Even if an important mission was at stake?”

“Even! It’s starting to hurt too much, even though I lucked out this time and Jason is trying very hard to forgive me.”

“So... what about you and Shawn being friends?”

“Jason and I need some more time. Someday soon, I want to build that bridge again. But I can only do it if Jason and him can be friends too. Of course it will help when Shawn finally realizes that someone is in love with him, someone who doesn’t have anyone else.”

Ashley chuckled.

“If we can’t all be friends again,” Liberty said, “than we will have lost something very special.”

Some of us have already lost, my friend, Ashley thought. Some of us have already lost.



Shawn was nearing the end of his tale. His mentor had listened intently as Shawn had described how Liberty’s emotional needs had become greater and greater as the mission progressed. He finished by describing the scene in the Residential Lobby from his point of view, and finally how glad he was that Sarah had asked him to look at her new flowers.

“Well, well,” Brother Jacob began, “it looks like the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty has claimed yet another victim, at least in an emotional sense.”

“I do feel closer to Ashley and Sarah now. But I hope I haven’t lost Liberty and Jason as friends.”

“I imagine they need some time to sort out their own feelings about each other. I have a hunch that Liberty chose the more difficult path. By going back to Jason, she risked winding up with no one.”

“I see what you mean,” Shawn said. “I never really expected her to choose

me, unless she was... you know..."

"I think the decision was probably a lot harder for her than you realize, even not being pregnant. She's not the only female at Lyceum who's had designs on you, I trust you know."

"Really?"

Brother Jacob smiled at Shawn's naiveté. "They usually come to the conclusion that you're already taken."

Shawn assumed that was because he spent so much time with Ashley and Liberty. He wondered who his secret admirers were, but he knew Jacob would never tell. "I guess it's about time to move on to other topics."

"Okay. You have now been a Lyceum member for a year. The same team that admitted you will be meeting next Wednesday to re-evaluate you, and your appointment is at ten o'clock. This is your self-evaluation booklet," he said, handing Shawn the thin workbook. "The team wants it by dinner time on Tuesday. If your evaluation team feels you should remain a member of Lyceum, and I have no reason to doubt that they will, and you decide you want to stay, you will incur some additional responsibilities."

"As I remember, I have to start doing something to earn my own money for spending or savings."

"Right. Roughly equivalent to one day of employment per week. But it can be anything from running a mail order business to singing at a night club, and we have members who do both."

"The homeless shelter downtown is always needing people, especially for night shifts."

"I didn't think you'd have much trouble with that new responsibility. Lyceum members seldom do. Also, a new class will be added to your schedule that will prepare you to teach and to be a mentor."

"Wow. That will be challenging. Do young members like Sarah do all these things?"

"At Sarah's age, they're not a requirement, but she sells crafts at a mall booth and makes more money than I do, and I'm sure you know she teaches two different classes. You have to be eighteen to be a mentor."

Shawn smiled. "I know I want to continue to be a member of Lyceum. I'll do my self-evaluation booklet this weekend."

“Excellent! Can we move on?”

“Yeah. I still like Physics, but I think I’d like to add Chemistry. Sister Mary said I could start in August...”



When Shawn went looking for a quiet corner in which to work on his self-evaluation booklet that Saturday, he had a little trouble. The first place he approached was already taken.

“Hi, Shawn!” Ashley said, looking up.

He could see that she was still wearing the broken coin necklace that she and Tim shared. “Hi, Ashley. How’s your booklet going?”

“Slowly. I hate tests. Especially this part about things that are wrong in my life. I’m not sure where to begin.”

“Do you want to stay a member?”

“For the rest of my life if I can!” she said.

Shawn smiled. His spirits were always lifted by Ashley’s confidence and cheerfulness, which she seemed to have even when making hard decisions. He just wished... that somehow that necklace wasn’t there.

“Well... I’ll see you later,” he said. “I have to start working on mine.”

The second place Shawn went was also taken.

Liberty looked up from her booklet, smiled, and waved shyly.

Shawn wasn’t ready to have a casual conversation with Liberty, and figured she probably felt the same way about him. He waved, and headed down another corridor.

The third place he tried was free. He picked a comfortable chair and low table, somewhat screened by potted plants from the rest of the lounge, spread out his Lyceum reference books and his personal notebooks, and went to work.

Three hours later he had a draft of all his answers completed... all except his answer to the question about his emotional happiness.



Chapter 15: Judgment by Peers

At eight o'clock on Wednesday morning, Ashley and Sister Heather entered the small conference room where the re-evaluation team was meeting. They sat down and Ashley looked at the faces around the table. All of them were either smiling or trying to hide a smile.

Ashley had already been to exercise class at 5:30, had spent twenty minutes in the Catholic chapel, had enjoyed the Worship and Reflection time led by Sister Claire, had eaten a hearty breakfast, and had vacuumed the common area of Rivendell Hall. She was ready for anything.

"Good morning, Sister Ashley!" Brother Randy Robert said. "We always start these meetings by answering the question we know is foremost in your mind. Although several of us have some thoughts to share with you, every person in this room agrees that you have been a valuable member of Lyceum, and it is our pleasure to welcome you today as a permanent member."

Ashley grinned.

"I'd like to mention," Sister Sheena said, "that our use of the word 'valuable' is in a very literal sense in your case, Ashley. Lyceum generally *invests* about twenty thousand dollars during a new member's first year. In your case, Lyceum has *profited* by your activities by about ten thousand."

Ashley's mouth opened, but she didn't know what to say.

"And," Brother Howard began, "that does not include the value of the life you saved, which may have resulted in the saving of millions of lives, considering the politics involved."

Ashley was rapidly turning red with embarrassment.

“On another topic,” Brother Timoteo began, “both we and the United Nations have noted that you have brought your French to a high level of fluency, and that you have taken advantage of numerous leadership and diplomatic training opportunities during the past year. If you will leave your I.D. book with Sister Leonora in the near future, she will properly endorse it for Level Two Diplomatic Clearance, which will allow you to fill the roles of Technician or Interpreter on diplomatic missions.”

Now she was grinning from ear to ear with pride.

“I wish to mention,” Sister Maria began, “that bringing Jenny Clark into the Hospice Program was both insightful and courageous. I know Jenny is thankful of the time she had with us, and you may have heard that her music is becoming widely known and popular.”

“Yes,” Ashley whispered, although she was feeling sad at that moment remembering Jenny.

“We are, of course, very proud of your gymnastics accomplishments, and we hope you have found plenty of opportunities at Lyceum to make your dreams come true in that area,” Brother Ben said. “You certainly deserve every possible chance to make them a reality.”

Ashley nodded. “Lyceum has helped me make more dreams come true than I knew I had!”

Everyone either smiled or chuckled.

“Your teachers tell us that you are a good student, and that you are well on your way to completing your G.E.D.,” Brother Henry said. “We also hear that you are a pleasure to work with, and that you are very skillful and productive at all your work assignments.”

Ashley grinned. “I’ve always liked doing a good job at my work and my chores.”

“I, however, have a criticism,” Sister Rachael said with a serious but kindly look on her face. “And the concern I am about to express is shared by all of us.”

Ashley ceased grinning and paid close attention.

“You are very good at pushing yourself to fulfill all your responsibilities, and going on from there to accomplish many good things that no one ever

expected of you. I have no fault with that aspect of your personality. It probably qualifies you for sainthood.”

Ashley cracked a tiny smile.

“You are much less good at taking care of your own heart, at getting the love and support you need to handle the stresses you are often under. You are young and strong, and you might be able to go on like that for awhile, but someday it will catch up with you. Someday you will find yourself unable to do what needs to be done, for Lyceum, for yourself, for an employer, or for someone you love, just because you have neglected your own heart.”

Ashley’s head was bowed, and the tears were very close. She knew what Rachael was talking about. Suddenly she felt the intense need to tell them what happened. They cared about her, and she wanted them to know.

“As soon as Tim saw my bandages, he...” She couldn’t say any more as her body started shaking and the tears came rolling out. Sister Heather wrapped her arms around the crying thirteen-year-old, and Sarah and Joan came around the table to help comfort her. Everyone else in the room felt her pain in one way or another. They had all been there in their own fashion.

After a few minutes, Ashley was able to speak again. She completed her story, even though everyone had guessed the ending. But because Sarah was in the room, she didn’t say anything about her feelings for Shawn. She would just have to find someone else... someday.

The team made some suggestions for social and recreational activities that Ashley might enjoy, and she promised to get the cosmetic plastic surgery done as soon as the Olympic games were over. Finally, with nine o’clock rapidly approaching, she exchanged hugs and handshakes with everyone in the room, and departed with Sister Heather at her side. Just before she left, Brother Timoteo slipped a folded note into her hand.

Liberty was waiting in the lounge outside, and when she saw Ashley’s red eyes, she looked concerned. But Ashley flashed her friend a grin, and Liberty relaxed, waved, and entered the conference room.

Ashley spent another half hour with her mentor, who then had to leave for work. Sitting on the front steps of the Main Lobby, letting the morning sun strike her face and arms, Ashley dug in her pocket and pulled out the note Brother Timoteo had given her.

Ashley,

I'm sorry I haven't been on campus much recently. I will be around a little more from now on. Would you enjoy having dinner with a fellow diplomat, in the Garden Dining Room, at five o'clock?

Brother T.

Ashley felt a tiny bit of warmth enter a place inside her that had been cold ever since her last televideo call to New Orleans. She hopped up and dashed to the nearest computer screen to leave a note for Brother Timoteo saying that she would be happy to have dinner with him.



Liberty stepped into the conference room alone.

Sarah hopped up and met her. "Since you don't have a mentor right now, can I sit with you?"

Liberty smiled. "Sure!" she said, feeling a sudden warmth for the almost ten-year-old girl, who knew nearly everything Liberty was thinking, but never blabbed it to anyone.

They sat down side by side and Liberty felt much more at ease than she had expected.

"Zdrastvui, Siestra Svaboda," elderly Sister Rebecca said. "Since your self-evaluation booklet indicates that you wish to remain a member of Lyceum, we will begin by telling you that we are in unanimous agreement that you have, in every way, earned our respect and love, and we welcome you as a permanent member for as long as you wish to stay."

A huge smile flashed onto Liberty's face, and she hugged Sarah warmly.

"No amount of appreciation from us compensates for the honorable way in which you handled the attempt on your life," Brother Timoteo began, "and the great service you gave to humanity by taking your message all over the world on your recent trip. We realize that trip carried an emotional price for you and others. We are all at your service if there is anything we can do to help those wounds to heal."

"Thank you," she whispered.

"We have noted your strong leadership skills," Brother Howard said, "and

we want you to know that your first Diplomatic Clearance will be granted very soon, after you have a chance to firm up your Russian fluency just a little bit more. You chose a difficult language, but we understand that you very much enjoyed your recent visit to Russia, and your language skills are definitely sufficient for you to spend some time at our planning office in Moscow if you would like to. That would be an excellent way to polish your fluency, and fulfill your residency requirement for a clearance.”

“I’d like that very much! As long as I can take Jason...”

Many smiles reassured her that it was possible.

“By the way, Liberty,” Sister Maria said, “we have confirmation from the Secretary General that the vote will be on August 14th, and he would appreciate you being ready at two o’clock.”

Liberty closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I’ll be ready.”

“You have handled the discovery of your own telepathic abilities very well,” Sister Rachael said. “I will be teaching a class starting next month for you, Sarah, Marty, and the three sensitives we have on campus, so that you can all hone your talent, protect your privacy, and learn to respect the privacy of other telepaths.”

“I’ll be there!” Liberty said. “Unless I’m in Russia.”

“We understand you are almost ready for your rotary-wing private pilot’s exams,” Sister Joan said, “and that you are becoming skillful at the maintenance and minor repair of those complex and wonderful aircraft. We wish you well, and we look forward to flying with you as our pilot.”

Liberty smiled with pride. “I just have a handful of lessons to master, and a few more hours of flight training time!”

Brother Ben said, “We all share with you the loss of Sister Nancy, and we also know that you and your father lost more than we did. You seem to have healed from that loss for the most part, but the fact that you have not yet selected a new mentor causes us to worry that you are still hurting somewhere inside. We trust you are smart enough to know that you need to let that remaining wound heal, and let another watch over you, just as we all, young and old, have someone to watch over us.”

“I’ll try,” she whispered.

“Your teachers all tell us that you are a brilliant student,” Sister Sheena

said. "We all know that you have become one of Lyceum's most competent Environmental Control Technicians. We are aware that you earned your G.E.D. Honors Certificate last winter, and we understand you have made great strides in your baking skills and in your ability to enjoy and care for children."

"Children are still hard sometimes, but I figure I'd better get used to them... or become celibate!"

Everyone in the room laughed. No one thought that Liberty had the slightest chance of becoming celibate any time soon.

"I just have a few criticisms to share," Brother Henry said. "We know the circumstances that caused considerable stress recently between you, Jason, and Shawn. No one here pretends to have a perfect answer to the problem you faced. Many of us might have done less well in that situation. Please just remember that when a heart gets broken here at Lyceum, we still have to live together, work together, and play together. We have all learned to be careful with relationships."

Liberty's eyes looked sad. "I don't ever want to do that to anyone again. I may have lost one of the best friends I've ever had, and... it's not worth it. I want to start taking responsibility for my emotions. What I did to Shawn is... too much like the way I used to treat people back in Philadelphia."

Brother Henry nodded. "We have noticed that you are still sometimes bothered when you discover that people younger than you are better than you at things. Lyceum is one of the gathering places of the gifted. If you want to be comfortable here, you will have to get used to that fact. When you are tempted to feel envious of someone, perhaps it would help to pause and consider how many of us would be envious of you if we allowed ourselves to be."

Liberty was red with embarrassment. She had no idea her weaknesses were so well known. She nodded in acknowledgment, but tears were too close to allow her to speak.

The meeting turned to lighter thoughts, and by the time Liberty left, she was in a good mood again. But as she stepped out into the corridor, leaving alone as she had come, she passed Shawn and Brother Jacob going in, and her heart leapt inside her. She knew she would never again ask him to be her

lover, no matter how much stress she was under, but she longed for the day when they could sit at the same table again, along with Ashley and Jason and Sarah, and know that they were the best of friends.



“Hello, Shawn,” Sister Joan said.

Shawn had always admired the sixteen-year-old who worked in the Biology Lab, but knew she was very tight with the young doctor Randy Robert.

“It’s good to be here,” Shawn said. “The last year has been the most wonderful year of my life, even though...” He looked at the floor. “Even though it’s had its up and downs.”

“I understand,” Joan said. “My first year at Lyceum was an emotional roller coaster too. But that’s another story. Brother Shawn, I have the honor of telling you that you are now a permanent member of Lyceum. Your ability to serve others is exceptional, and we are very lucky that you have chosen to stay.”

Shawn was smiling in his own timid way.

“You showed just how dedicated you are to Lyceum, its members, and its missions when you accompanied Liberty on her recent journey,” Brother Timoteo said. “The demands she placed on you were unusual, and in supporting her, you risked losing your other friends.”

“It seemed to be God’s will at the time.”

“That you must discern for yourself. We just want you to know that we are all in awe of your courage and your ability to give of yourself, but we also want you to know that when Liberty’s needs became extreme, you could have said *no*, and we would have understood.”

“Thank you,” Shawn said. “I guess I might feel differently in the future if I’m ever in a committed relationship with someone.”

Sarah started to smile, but stopped herself before Shawn noticed.

“Your willingness to confront your father was appreciated far beyond our ability to express,” Brother Howard said. “An enemy like that could have cost Lyceum millions in public relations efforts and legal costs. Hopefully your assertiveness will pave the way for a reconciliation someday.”

“Maybe, but I don’t think so. I had to do it. He controlled my life for too long as it was.”

Brother Howard nodded in understanding.

“Your work with Marty Jelwen has been invaluable,” Sister Rachael said. “You have created a stronger, more beneficial relationship with him than just about anyone else. His parents have commented several times on how much Marty likes you.”

“I’m very comfortable with Marty, but I’m glad Sarah works with him too because of his telepathic abilities!”

Sarah grinned.

“All of your teachers say that you are dedicated to your studies,” Sister Sheena said, “and we know what a change you made in your educational path after coming to Lyceum, from being forbidden to study science, to delving into it with a passion. And we understand that you are fun to work with, and always put your whole heart into every task you undertake.”

“I was never allowed to do anything at home except clean my room. Now working is one of the most fun things in my life.”

“We have one concern that I have been asked to share,” Sister Maria said. “Even though you have come far from the days when your father dictated everything you could and could not do, you still have a tendency to be very passive when it comes to getting what you need in life. There are ways to be respectful of others, and at the same time to express your needs and wants so that others who care about you can give to you, just as you are so good at giving to others.”

Shawn bowed his head. “You’re right. I don’t like the ways my father got what he wanted. But I guess I haven’t figured out my own ways yet.”

“We have some workshops that might be useful to you. Brother Jacob can help you look into them if you want,” Sister Maria said.

Shawn’s meeting with the re-evaluation team ended with handshakes and embraces. Sarah looked at him with a special light in her eyes. She had known him for a year in person, and for more than another year through letters. She had seen him at his best, and at his worst. She very much liked what she saw, and hoped that someday he would look at her, and like what he saw.

But she was also very patient.



Jason was in the small animal barn tending a minor cut that one of his goats had received. It was a warm summer day about a week after Liberty had been accepted as a permanent member of Lyceum. He was happy for her, and he wanted to learn to trust her again, but he knew it was going to be a long, slow process. He was beginning to realize that this was the other side of the coin he had been given, a coin that had a very beautiful and desirable girl on its face.

As he finished salving the cut, he heard footsteps on the wooden floor of the barn, and a few moments later the stall door opened. Shawn sat down in the straw not far away.

"Hi, Shawn. Go on, Daisy," Jason said, giving the goat a little slap on the rump. She pranced out into the sunshine.

"I came to say I'm sorry," Shawn said.

Jason stayed seated, picked up a piece of straw and started twiddling with it. "I guess I could be angry at you, but that would be a little simplistic, wouldn't it? And I can't really bring myself to be angry at Liberty either, considering what she accomplished on that trip for... the whole world."

"She did more than I could have ever done, having to shake hands and smile and answer questions for all those government leaders."

Jason sat deep in thought for a moment. "The funny part is... if she had taken me, I don't know if I could have handled all that crying and stuff. Maybe what happened... is the only thing that could have worked. I don't know."

Shawn also picked up a piece of straw and started twiddling. "I promise I'll never go anywhere with her again, unless you're along too."

"Thanks. I guess if she had to do a mission like that again, she'd have to take you for the daytime, and me for the nighttime!" Jason said and cracked a smile.

Shawn smiled also.

"I gather she was your first," Jason said.

Shawn blushed. "Yeah."

"Brenda was my first. I still think about her, but our personalities are too different. I guess there's always a special place in your heart for your first lover."

"I... guess I'll never forget Liberty," Shawn said. "I just don't want anyone to hate me or be afraid of me. And... I feel like I owe you something. I don't know what... clean the barn for you ten times or something, I don't know. But I want to give you something."

Jason considered the offer. "Maybe that would help us both to feel finished with this business, I mean between you and me. It's a lot more complicated for me and Liberty. I'm going on vacation in October, and taking her with me if all is well between us by then. You can help Brother Mohammed take care of the animals for me while we're gone..."

"I'd be glad to!" Shawn said with relief and a smile.

"She doesn't know about it yet, so keep it to yourself."

"I will."

"Great. You should start coming a few days before we leave so I can show you everything. Do you have a vacation planned?"

"Um... no. I don't have anyone I can visit, and I really like being at Lyceum."

"What about Greece? Your Greek is getting good, I hear."

"Efharistó. Gosh... I hadn't thought about going there for a vacation. Would Lyceum pay for something like that?"

"If you study the language while you're there, and help out in the office in Athens a little, I bet it would be no problem."

"Am I interrupting?" Liberty said, leaning over the rail.

"Come on in, Lib," Jason said. "Shawn and I were just rebuilding some bridges."

Liberty sat down in the straw with them.

"I was here to apologize to Jason for what happened," Shawn said.

"And I'll say again what I have said to Jason many times in the last two weeks," Liberty said, "so that you can hear it too, Shawn. It was all my fault. And if I ever go on a hard mission again, I wouldn't mind having friends along, but they shouldn't have to deal with my deepest emotional needs. I'll take my lover along too."

The three young people clasped hands and looked into each other's eyes. Both Shawn and Liberty knew their feelings for each other would never go away. But for the sake of friendship, they were ready to keep those feelings in

their proper place. They had glimpsed the consequences of doing otherwise, and the price was more than they could pay.



Chapter 16: A Moment in History

In preparation for her tenth birthday, Sarah decided to make several changes in her life-style.

Most of the dolls and toys that had been cluttering her room and had not been played with recently were bagged for donation to a charitable thrift store. That left considerable free space, and she was glad. She was ready for a few new things in her life.

At a computer terminal, two craft classes she had been taking all year were dropped. Actually, she planned to go one more time to show her most recent creations and to say good-bye. They were replaced by Sister Claire's Horsemanship class and Brother Wilhelm's Gourmet Cooking class.

With Rachael's help, she picked out a new dress, of a lavender velveteen material, that complemented her hair and skin colors perfectly, and gave just the right impression of youthful grace mixed with rapidly maturing femininity.

Then she wrote her invitations.

Only her female friends received invitations, but each was welcome to bring a date. Liberty invited Jason, of course, and Charleen planned to bring Brian. Sister Rachael announced with a smile that Brother Aaron would be accompanying her.

Both Ashley and Tabitha might have been tempted to invite Shawn if the situation were different. But on this particular occasion, they had a hunch he would be receiving an invitation from another source. They conferred, and

decided the best thing to do was to invite each other. After all, Sarah hadn't said anything about gender!

Shawn received his invitation, written in calligraphy on hand-made marbled paper, bordered with pressed, dried flowers. As he was reading the request from his younger friend to accompany her on her birthday, he became aware that a subtle floral scent was emanating from the paper. He smiled, and sat down to finish wrapping her gift.



When the appointed hour arrived on the twelfth of August, with the sun moving toward the horizon and a warm evening at hand, all of Sarah's friends and their dates, wearing formal dresses or suits and ties, gathered at the van that Sister Rachael had reserved for the evening. They wondered where Sarah and Shawn were.

Up on the third floor of Timbuktu Hall, Shawn knocked on Sarah's door. It opened, and he was stunned by what he saw. She was truly beautiful, he admitted to himself, and seemed to be growing taller every day. He had long before ceased to notice the scar tissue on her face and neck. Her golden blond hair was longer than ever before, and slightly waved for the occasion. Her new dress, which he had not seen before that moment, made her look so grown up that he caught himself thinking of possibilities that he had never before allowed himself to consider. He quickly stopped himself. She was his friend. She was way too young to be anything else. He was just accompanying her on her birthday, nothing more. He offered his arm, she took it, and together they descended the steps and walked out to the awaiting van.

But on the way to their destination, as he sat beside her on the front passenger seat, he wondered, if she was just a friend, why she was such a very, very good friend.

They arrived at the tri-level mall where Sarah had chosen to spend the first evening of her second decade of life, and as it was still nearly an hour before their dinner reservation, they all looked at Sarah to know her pleasure.

But before she could open her mouth, Sister Rachael spoke. "My gift is one hundred dollars credit in the first store you enter, so be careful where you put your feet!"

Sarah grinned from ear to ear. Those empty spaces on her shelves were going to be quickly filled.

“Fifty in the second shop!” Liberty said.

“Fifty in the third shop!” Brother Aaron said.

“Twenty-five in the fourth shop!” Jason said. He was still saving up for the vacation he had planned, the one he hoped to share with Liberty.

Sarah decided to spend the time before dinner looking over all the shops, but not setting foot inside any. Then, she figured, after dinner she would know just where to go.

So they walked, and she pressed her face to the glass many times, and tried to imagine how the merchandise within fit into her new life-style. Her friends and her mentor pointed out silly things that she would never dream of wasting her credit on, and they all laughed and talked and had fun.



Their large table was ready when they arrived at the dining room which overlooked the multi-level courtyard of the mall. Sarah glowed with happiness when Shawn pulled out a chair for her and seated himself beside. The mood was quickly set when Sarah ordered a huge seafood and vegetable appetizer platter for everyone, and several bottles of sparkling concord grape juice. She surprised everyone, however, by ordering medium-rare prime rib for her own main dish.

But when it was time for dessert, Sarah was the one to be surprised. A whole cheesecake appeared, with a lit candle set in each slice. She glanced at Shawn, closed her eyes to make her wish, and then blew. It took a couple of extra well-aimed puffs of air to get the last three flames, but they all went out, and everyone clapped and cheered.

Everyone at Lyceum was aware of the changes Sarah was experiencing, and none of her gifts were childish. In between bites of cheesecake, she received books, disks, clothes, and craft tools. But the gift that felt most special to her was the leather bound blank book from Shawn. The beginning of her second decade was, she realized when she saw it, the perfect time to start a journal. Many important things were happening in her life, and she had hopes for even more important things in the near future, and she wanted to write them all down.

“Thank you!” she said, looking into his eyes while holding her precious gift.



Soon they returned to the mall promenade, and Sarah used her promised credit in a dress shop, a book store, a candle shop, and an art gallery. She couldn't afford original art, but she found a print that would go well in her evolving apartment.

When they returned to Lyceum, the entire birthday group helped her carry her gifts upstairs. It was after ten o'clock, and on any ordinary evening most of them would have soon been preparing for bed. But they could all remember a time when, for one reason or another, they had been up in the middle of the night, and Sarah had always been there, helping out, bringing them treats, or just keeping them company. They looked at each other.

“Why don't we all change into comfortable clothes,” Sister Rachael said, “and then meet in the Cedar Grove! I know some folk dances that really come alive in the moonlight.”

“I'll bring goodies!” Liberty said.

“I'll bring lanterns!” Brother Aaron said.

“I'll see if the pool in the Vesuvius Garden is free!” Tabitha said.

Everyone dashed to their rooms to change. Most of them were leaving for New York the following day, and so their responsibilities were being covered by others. They could catch up on sleep during the flight. That night was a very special night for their friend Sarah, and they had no intention of letting her spend it alone.



Forty-three Lyceum members left for the airport shortly after breakfast the following morning. Several of them could hardly keep their eyes open, and had their heads nestled in pillows as soon as they boarded the airliner. Sarah felt very honored that they had stayed up all night just for her. She did not, however, feel sleepy.

Everyone was looking a bit more alive when they landed in New York. A United Nations bus collected them at the airport and carved its way through mid-day traffic into Manhattan. Lyceum's large apartment quickly became crowded with excited but anxious members.

“Brothers and Sisters!” Sister Ruth said over the chatter.

Everyone fell silent.

“Liberty and her support people have a meeting with the Secretary General at three o’clock. That team meets with me in about twenty minutes, and we’ll go over together. The regular and supplemental U.N. office staff have a training session at four to go over the new services we’re offering to the countries involved in disarmament. That’s in conference room A-12. Ashley, you’re invited to that. Everyone will need to be familiar with that material eventually. Brother Li’s team is meeting with the Chinese delegation at five for dinner. Anyone who doesn’t have other plans can eat here between five and seven. The technical and dance teams can get into their facility at 7:30 to look everything over.”



The afternoon and evening were busy for everyone. Liberty was glad the Secretary General was a gentle man who had teenage grandchildren himself. He was very respectful as he made suggestions about Liberty’s planned speech. Liberty was also thankful that both Shawn and Jason were with her, and both of them were glad they wouldn’t have to handle the full force of her emotional needs all alone.

Most of the members enjoyed eating a simple dinner of slow-cooked pork roast and pot herbs in the Lyceum apartment that evening. They knew there would be plenty of formal meals during the next few days.

After returning from the dance facility, where they would be performing in just two days, Liberty, Ashley, and Tabitha were dead tired, still short on sleep, and more than ready to fall onto their sleeping bags. Only Sarah still had any energy, sitting in the living room with Brother Keith and several other members who had high levels of diplomatic clearance as they quietly discussed recent and upcoming events until they too were sleepy.



In the morning Brother Timoteo led worship and reflection while muffins, hash browns, and eggs cooked in the kitchen. Ashley remembered her dinner with him fondly. It had come at just the right time to boost her spirits for this mission. She had enjoyed the training session the day before, even though it had forced her to leave Liberty’s side early, and Ashley was excited about the

other events she would be helping with while they were in New York. Even though she continued to be a little baffled by the situation, every time she took part in anything to do with diplomacy, she seemed to understand and feel comfortable with all of it. But it seemed less strange when she reminded herself that she couldn't be a gymnast forever. Gymnastics belonged to the young. She wouldn't be young for the rest of her life.

After breakfast, nearly everyone headed over to the United Nations building. There were more training sessions and meetings all morning long, although Shawn was happy to see that Liberty and Jason had some free time, and equally as glad that he himself didn't, so that the two of them would not feel guilty about getting into the museum or the garden together. There were times when three was company, and times when three was a crowd. Shawn was very glad he had kept them both as friends, and his part of that revived friendship meant accepting that Liberty had chosen Jason as her lover, not him. He would find someone... he just wasn't sure when or where. And he said a silent prayer of thanks that his feelings of being alone had not plunged him into another self-pitying depression like they had at Christmas.

All of the Lyceum members joined the U.N. diplomatic staff for a buffet lunch in the headquarters' huge dining room, and there was much discussion about the work that lay ahead of them, whether the Treaty was approved that afternoon in the General Assembly, as was expected, or whether one or two nuclear nations backed out at the last minute and the entire process was put on hold.

Liberty was excited. Even though it had not always been her choice to do so, she had put a great amount of her own personal energy into the Treaty, and was hoping it would be given a chance. She knew the history of nuclear weapons better than most people. Three times they had been used in war or terrorism, twice in the previous century, once in the century into which Liberty and her friends had been born. That was enough. The world had been in nearly complete agreement for more than twenty years that those awesome weapons should never again be used against people. Liberty could see that the Treaty, or something like it, was the only way to achieve that goal.



Shortly after one o'clock, the delegates of all the nations of the world

entered the General Assembly Hall. Most of the Lyceum members who were in the city were already seated in the visitors area, along with hundreds of others, including one senator from Pennsylvania. Television cameras and their operators could be seen in the media boxes.

Liberty, surrounded by Jason, Shawn, and two armed U.N. guards, was seated in a special section along with the Secretary General and several heads of state who had chosen to be present. She was nervous. None of the other talks she had given about the Treaty had been televised. They had only worked their way into the newspapers after the fact. Today, she knew, the entire world was watching. And she also knew that no matter what happened today, there would be millions of people in the world who would want to thank her, and millions of others who would want to kill her. Suddenly she knew what her father felt like, being a United States senator. And something she had said to her father more than a year ago, before she had even seen Lyceum, flashed into her mind.

...I like that world-class feeling, Daddy, and Lyceum has it...

Now there she was, ready to step onto the world stage, and her stomach was tied in knots even though she had brewed a strong cup of her special tea at lunch. For a moment she wished Ashley could take her place. She would do a much better job. But suddenly she understood something: Ashley was destined to be the hard-working behind-the-scenes diplomat, as were all of the Lyceum members who worked in international diplomacy and most of the U.N. diplomatic staff. They never got any credit. Others, who had pretty faces and a few smooth words, earned the love of the people.

Liberty felt ashamed. She didn't deserve the world's love, and she wasn't going to accept it, not without sharing it with those who did deserve it. And that sudden decision, made moments before it had to be implemented, was destined to effect her speech that day before the General Assembly, the celebration she would host the following day, and the rest of her life.



The Secretary General rose and approached the high podium.

"Good afternoon, honorable delegates. Today's session will be opened with prayer offered by Sister Lydia of New Zealand."

Everyone knew that Sister Lydia had been chosen to open the session that

day because New Zealand was within the Pacific Nuclear-Free Zone, a part of the world into which no nuclear weapons were allowed. Robed in Lyceum blue, she stepped to a low speaking platform and spread her arms toward the ceiling.

“May we speak this day with tongues made wise through experience. May we listen this day with ears that are open to truth, truth that might be spoken, and truth that is only whispered to us from within. May we walk this day on paths that will lead us into a future we can embrace with our hearts and our minds. May we remember that no matter what we do here today, together we are, and together we will remain now and forever.”

Sister Lydia returned to her seat. Shawn knew how hard it must be to write prayers that would speak to everyone and offend no one.

The Secretary General returned to the high podium.

“General Assembly Resolution 24-1446 instructed me to ask Sister Liberty Buchanan to speak to you on this occasion. Please welcome her.”

The room filled with applause, and Liberty turned red, but knew this wasn't the time to act embarrassed. She stood, squeezed Jason's hand, touched Shawn on the shoulder, and approached the podium. The Secretary General shook her hand warmly as the applause continued. Then he returned to his seat and left her there alone with the whole world watching.

She felt herself begin to tremble, but then she happened to spot Ashley in the visitors section. She couldn't see the scars on Ashley's face from that distance, but she knew they were there. Her own feelings subsided and her stomach even seemed to relax a little. She glanced at her notes and then looked at her audience of delegates, world leaders, visitors, and cameras.

“Standing before you is the greatest honor I have ever had. And I believe today might be the most important day for the world that will occur during my lifetime. I am not here because of who I am or because of anything I have done. At home I care for horses, and I help run computer control systems, and I am studying to be a pilot someday. I have dear friends, and a young man I hope to marry when I am a little more grown up. In most ways I am just like young people all over the world, and it is their message that I bring to you today.

“The first time someone tried to end my life because doing so might help

them stop the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty, two of my friends were there to save me. They now carry wounds and scars because they were my friends at that moment. They were nine and thirteen years old at the time. It is their message that I wish to share.

“The most important thing to the children and youth of the world is that they have a family. Families come in many shapes and sizes, but in every family, there are parents who make the hard decisions and protect the children from the worst of their own mistakes. In any family that uses guns or sharp tools or dangerous chemicals, the parents keep them in a locked box or on a high shelf. And the children, ultimately, are glad.

“I hope you have all noticed that during the past one or two centuries, the world has become a family of nations and a family of cultures. Young people have certainly noticed. All of you here have come together for a world family meeting. Since the United Nations began, small nations have looked to large ones for resources, weak nations have looked to strong ones for protection, young nations have looked to older ones for wisdom.

“And now, fifteen members of our world family have nuclear weapons, and we don’t want to ever use them again. What shall we do with them? We could scrap them all, and pretend we don’t know how to make them...”

Liberty was silent for a moment, looking at the delegates.

“Yes, you and your governments have had the intelligence to not choose that path. You know that the children of the world would grow up and figure out how to make them again. Remember, we might be the source of the world’s curiosity, but we are not the depository of the world’s wisdom.”

The room erupted into laughter, and Liberty smiled.

“So the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty was crafted by countless diplomats working all over the world during the last ten years or more. It creates a box where we can put our most dangerous weapons, and keep them well oiled and in working order. The box will be locked and no single member of our family will be able to open it. But if we ever need them again, really need them, they will be ready. Maybe none of us alive today will ever see a need for them, and I hope very much that we don’t.

“But we cannot see what the future will bring. Perhaps, someday, in some dangerous situation we cannot imagine, our children will be glad we had the

intelligence to create them, the prudence to put them in a box, and the wisdom to hold onto the key.”

Liberty stopped to breathe. Somehow, although she couldn’t say how, she had gotten to the end of her notes. But she had one more thing she wanted to say.

“Whatever you decide, tomorrow I will dance for you, as will many other young people from all over the world. We will dance for you just because we are happy to be alive, and because we are glad that wise men and women like you watch over us, make the hard decisions, and pass on the wisdom of the world. Thank you.”

She stepped down as the room filled with clapping again. She was shaking when she landed in her seat between Shawn and Jason. The Secretary General was back at the podium waiting for the applause to die down.

“Thank you, Sister Liberty. I have requests from thirty-four delegations to address the Assembly. The delegation from Spain has the floor.”



Liberty listened to the speakers while her heart slowly quit pounding and her hands reluctantly stopped shaking. The remarks of the many delegations who spoke sounded very hopeful, ranging from unconditional support of the Treaty, to support with minor reservations. Only one middle-eastern country spoke against the Treaty, and everyone in the room knew that they did not possess nuclear weapons, and if the rest of the world had anything to say about it, never would.

After about an hour and a half, every delegation who had any desire to speak had done so, and no procedural issues had arisen to reschedule the vote. The Secretary General called for a voice presentation by the nuclear nations of the world.

“The government of the United Kingdom has ratified the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty as worded.”

“The people of Israel have ratified the treaty under consideration.”

“The duly elected government of India has sustained the treaty as presented.”

Liberty listened anxiously while several other delegations also announced their support.

“The government of the People’s Republic of China is in support of the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty.”

“The Australian government has ratified the item under consideration.”

Ashley was practically out of her seat with excitement.

“The treaty under consideration had been approved by the people’s government of Ukraine.”

“The Congress of the United States of America has ratified the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty.”

Shawn was holding his breath. There were only two more.

“The people of Russia endorse the treaty as proposed.”

A big smile flashed onto Liberty’s face. If they hadn’t endorsed it, she would have immediately switched her language studies to Swahili or Urdu. Only one more.

“The government of France has duly ratified the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty as worded.”

Liberty hugged Jason, then Shawn. But tension still filled the room, and the words of the Secretary General caught her attention again.

“The General Assembly in its entirety will now consider the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty. As previously decided in Resolution 23-0528, this is a Class One treaty requiring eighty percent support for passage. The delegates may now vote.”

For the next minute, the room was completely silent, save for the soft clicks of the delegates pressing their voting keys. Liberty scarcely breathed and was perched on the edge of her seat.

“All votes are locked,” the Secretary General said. “I have two hundred and five votes in support, and two votes opposed. The Nuclear Disarmament Treaty is sustained by this body, the General Assembly of the United Nations.”

The massive room was filled with applause and cheering. Liberty flew straight up into the air, clapping even before she landed. Many embraces and handshakes were exchanged throughout the delegates and the visitors. Seldom, during all the decades during which that great room had served as the focal point of international diplomacy, had such a joyful sound been heard filling its immense volume. Several people abandoned all their inhibitions and began dancing in the isles, and the many security guards throughout the

room were too busy clapping and smiling to care.

Only two delegates sat morosely, not taking part in the exchange of congratulations. That was okay. The world had been watching those two nations closely for many years. The world was willing to continue to do so.

* * *

Chapter 17: The Ultimate Celebration

The celebration began as soon as the vote was over.

Normally the Security Council would have to vote on a treaty that effected world security, and the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty certainly qualified in that respect. But since all of the nations who formed the Council had already sustained the Treaty in the General Assembly, their meeting the following day would be just a formality. The party could begin.

First came a diplomatic reception at which everyone who had not yet done so wanted to meet Liberty. She kept Jason or Shawn by her side at all times, and after awhile was beginning to wish she could borrow some of Ashley's scars.

Ashley, on the other hand, was enjoying a small plate of hors d'oeuvres and the company of Brother Timoteo and a lady on the diplomatic staff. They were discussing the new services Lyceum would be making available, and the ways in which their work would be different in the future because of the Treaty. Ashley felt right at home.

From the reception they went directly to the formal banquet.

Liberty finally felt she could relax, so she thanked Shawn and made sure he was happily seated beside Sarah, and then found a place with Jason just a few seats away. Ashley and Tabitha were right across the table.

Soon elegant salads began to arrive, followed by artfully prepared veal cordon blue. The three friends exchanged glances of delight as they savored the excellent cooking, listened in on conversations in whatever languages they

could understand, and wondered why Fate had put them so close to the middle of such ponderous events. It was not so long ago, they remembered, that labels such as *Run-away*, *Orphan*, and *Prostitute* had been used to describe their lives.

When the eating and drinking, laughing and talking were finally over at close to midnight, the three friends were all physically tired, but their spirits were as high as the clouds. It had been a day like no other, a day they would remember for the rest of their lives.



Ashley woke about seven o'clock the following morning to find Sarah and a few others munching on a continental breakfast that had been laid out in the kitchen, but most everyone else was still asleep. She took a quick shower, rolled up her sleeping bag, and made sure everything she would need for that evening was in her gym bag.

Soon more people were stirring, and Ashley headed for the kitchen to collect a cup of yogurt and a roll.

"Someone left a message for you while you were in the shower," Brother Keith said.

"Thanks!" She went over to the computer screen, and as she read the short note, a smile grew on her face. "Karen and the other people I invited will be landing at 5:20. Can we pick them up at the airport?"

"I can do that," Sister Tamiko said. "Just put their flight information on my clipboard. That way you can focus on getting ready for your performance."

"Thanks, Tamiko!"

"But you're in charge of the breakfast dishes and leftovers. Fair?"

"Fair!" Ashley said with a grin.

Finally, at about ten o'clock, everyone was up and the last few to rise were eating. Ashley started cleaning up the kitchen, and Brother Glen gathered his technical crew and they soon headed for the arena.

"Rehearsal planning meeting!" Liberty announced.

Ashley, Tabitha, and Sarah gathered around her in the living room.

"The dance companies have the floor at one, two, three, and four o'clock. That leaves five o'clock and on for us, and the floor has to be cleared by 6:45."

“We’re going to have to eat dinner early,” Tabitha said.

“Yeah. Brother Don said he would bring it in for us, and I suggested three o’clock, but we can still change that...”

“Sounds about right to me,” Ashley said. “And then we’ll need a bunch of fruit and stuff for later.”

“Right. I’ll add that to his list. Fruit...”

“Yogurt, juice, and nuts,” Sarah said.

“Got it. What else do we need?”

“I brought tape and chalk,” Tabitha said. “Do you have something to warm-up in, Liberty?”

“No. I just brought my performance leotard.”

“I have an extra that’ll fit you, if you don’t mind basic black,” Tabitha said.

“For warming up, who cares? Thank you. It’ll be nice to not get my good one sweaty before the performance. It was specially made for tonight.”

Ashley finished her work in the kitchen while her friends got their gym bags packed. Soon the van had returned, ready to take the performers and the four adult members who had been assigned to assist the foreign dance companies.

The van wound its way through Manhattan and entered the underground parking lot of the arena shortly after noon. They went upstairs in an elevator to find Brother Glen and his team hard at work on the lighting and sound systems. The arena was larger than the one at Lyceum, with many thousands of seats. Behind them, the elevator opened again, and the first of the dance companies came pouring out, bags in hand, their eyes wide at the huge arena before them. They ranged from about ten to twenty years of age, and were speaking Russian amongst themselves. Liberty’s face immediately lit up, and she dashed over to introduce herself and practice her language skills.

“I don’t think we’ll be seeing her for awhile!” Tabitha said.

“I think you’re right,” Ashley said. “She gets her Level One Clearance soon, and I think she really liked Russia.”

“I bet we’ll lose sight of you when the French dancers get here!” Sarah said.

“Just for a little while. Shall we go change and do some stretching?”

“Yeah!” Tabitha said.



Liberty spent as much time as she could with the Russian company, talking with them when possible, just listening to their language at other times. They were glad of her attention, as it was seldom that they found people in other parts of the world willing to learn their language. It wasn't until hours later that they finally realized Liberty was the hostess of the entire event.

But from one to two o'clock, she had to leave them alone so they could practice on the arena floor. Then she was back with them until Tabitha dragged her away for their mid-afternoon meal.

Brother Don had brought them a variety of foods, including Ashley's perpetual favorite, spinach and chicken salad. He had also stocked an ice chest with fruit and other snacks for later. As soon as she was done eating, Ashley dashed away to greet the French company.



Ashley's welcome was different than the one Liberty had received. She was in an old practice leotard, her hair was coming out of her hair band, and she hadn't yet applied any makeup to her scars. The director of the dance company quickly assumed she was just some waif looking for a free dance lesson or a tip. Sister Judy, who had been assigned to that company, saw that Ashley was holding her own, and so didn't intervene. Ashley hung around, listened to the language (making mental notes about words she might not be pronouncing correctly), and helped with supplies or other needs whenever she could.

The director received a shock when he asked Sister Judy for a slight change in the timing of the program, and was informed that Ashley would also have to okay the change. He apologized profusely, in English, while Ashley studied the schedule change. She forgave him, in French, and realized she was going to have to take precautions when she was away from Lyceum and she needed people to respect her, at least until the cosmetic surgery was done.



At five o'clock, the dance floor was free for Liberty, Ashley, Tabitha, and Sarah to practice. The huge mat was positioned so that it could be quickly unrolled for the gymnastics routines, and then rolled back up and out of the

way afterwards. Shawn and the other members who were ushering were making their plans, and Brother Glen wore a headset as he went from place to place in the arena requesting changes in the lighting or the sound levels.

It wasn't long before the dance companies filed into the auditorium seats to watch. They were impressed by what they saw and clapped loudly, even though it was just a rehearsal and no one was yet in their performance clothing. They were all world-class, and they were beginning to feel they were in the company of other world-class performers.

At 6:45 Liberty announced, in English and Russian, that it was time to clear the arena, and the assigned hosts translated for the other companies. Everyone headed for the preparation rooms to get changed.

For a few minutes the building was very quiet, and Shawn went about with Brother Fred making sure all the ushers and security people were ready. At a few minutes before seven, those who had special invitations began to arrive, including most of the delegates to the United Nations and just about everyone on the diplomatic staff. They were guided to special sections where security personnel were already stationed. Then at 7:15 the doors were opened to general ticket holders, and the seats began to fill.

The television cameras were already at work, zooming in on the V.I.P.s as narrators named them and described the parts they had played in the drama that had led to the enactment of the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty. It was the television access that was paying for the four dance companies to be there, and for the cost of the arena. The general admissions would fund Lyceum's many other expenses for the event in particular, and its diplomatic work in general.

Shortly after 7:30 the arena was full and the doors were closed. The lights dimmed and the audience fell silent.



The music started softly but rhythmically, and a shaft of golden light grew on a single dancer in the middle of the floor. Her long black hair swirled slowly as she moved, and her deep blue leotard shimmered as swaths of the same material flowed from her shoulders, her arms, and her waist.

The song picked up its tempo and more spotlights came into play as she danced more energetically but no less gracefully. The music was deeply

rhythmic, expectant, and irresistibly moving. The dancer was tall, glowing with youthful beauty, and completely involved in the music with every part of her body. The audience was mesmerized.

A bridge in the fully orchestrated piece sent the dancer leaping across the floor, spinning to dissonants of some unseen but deeply felt conflict, and then prancing back in search of her unfulfilled destiny.

Then in larger and larger circles she danced, at one with greater and more powerful themes, again and again, seeming to present her passion to each individual in the audience. Their hearts went out to her, not for simple human love alone, but also for a higher, more magnificent purpose that threatened to consume both dancer and watcher.

The music built to a breathtaking crescendo, and she leapt and spun in ecstasy, circling quickly back to the center. And then suddenly the song relaxed and let its spell fade, and the dancer melted slowly into a simple huddled ball in the middle of the floor, in the slowly fading light.

And again there was silence.

Until finally the audience realized that they were free once more to breathe. And as soon as one person's hands came together in the first clap, the spell was at last broken, and the entire audience roared with applause as a spotlight rose upon the dancer, now standing with her head bowed.

She kept her head in seemingly abject humility until the applause faded. Then she looked up and the room fell silent at her glance.

"In honor of the millions of people who have already given their lives in modern wars to keep the world free and safe, in honor of all those who have already perished under the terrible effects of nuclear weapons, and in honor of those who have worked so hard and sacrificed so much to make the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty a reality, I welcome you to New York City, I welcome you to Time Square Arena, and I welcome you to Dances for a Nuclear-Safe Planet. I am Sister Liberty Buchanan."

The audience again gave her a hearty response.

"Until yesterday, my life was forfeited. Now, with the Treaty in place, my life has new meaning, and every moment that I am alive is a gift that I must share with others. Tonight I will dance for you, and tomorrow I will return home to tend my garden and fulfill my other responsibilities with all the love

in my heart.”

Again she received a strong applause.

“But I can do nothing by myself. I am just a tool in the hand of... something I don’t pretend to understand. My friends Ashley and Sarah understand these things much better than I do. They will dance for you later, and you will see that understanding in a gracefulness that can only be compared to angels themselves.

“But first we will reach to the other side of the planet, in honor of diplomats and thinkers who have labored in far-away places without our knowledge or reward. Please join me in welcoming the Shanti Dancers of Amritsar, India!”



The audience cheered as they filed out, colorful saris flowing around them. They seemed very young, perhaps ranging from five to fifteen years old, but they soon proved their excellence, and for the next quarter of an hour they thrilled everyone with dances that were slow, romantic, and mysterious — dances that were energetic and almost acrobatic — dances that were sometimes sacred, and at other times clearly sensuous — dances that were now youthful and innocent, now pregnant with worldly experience.

After the final applause, the audience was mystified because one little dancer remained in the center of the room after all the others had left. Liberty, in all her tall, flowing beauty approached the little brown girl, and then knelt down so that they were the same height. They looked into each other’s eyes, and the world watched.

The little dancer from India took something from a pouch on her belt and handed it to Liberty, speaking several words in her native language. Liberty’s microphone picked up the girl’s words clearly for everyone to hear, if not understand.

“Thank you,” Liberty said. “And here is an invitation to visit my home.”

They embraced, and then the girl ran off to rejoin her company.

Liberty stood. “And now, let us welcome the Beijing Modern Dance Academy, from The People’s Republic of China!”



Thirty oriental youth pranced into the arena in traditional costumes as

everyone clapped, and began by performing several folk dances from ancient and medieval Chinese history. The audience obviously enjoyed every moment.

But then they surprised everyone by tossing away their old fashioned garb, leaving them scantily dressed, and launched into a vibrant modern dance to synthesized music. It included mime and gymnastics, and spoke of life the way only young people can experience it, full of magic, full of mystery, full of longing.

And when they finally finished, Liberty thought the audience would never quit clapping. But finally, on some signal from their leader, the dancers quickly emptied the floor, again all but one.

This young man was almost as tall as Liberty. She approached, and they looked into each other's eyes. He spoke in Chinese and handed her something.

Liberty smiled with embarrassment. Even though she had been told beforehand the meaning of his words, she hadn't realized he would be so handsome. "Thank you. I look forward to dancing in your country. And here is a picture of me for you to keep."

He trotted gracefully off the floor and everyone clapped.

"As you can see," Liberty said to her exuberant audience, "the dance companies who are performing for you today are world-class. This day deserves nothing less. And now, from the largest country in the world, where the sun is rising at one end soon after it sets at the other end, let's welcome the Moscow Junior Ballet Academy!"



Twenty-eight young, but very serious, classical ballet dancers entered the arena in full form, and the audience was immediately captivated by their expressive skill. They plunged right into a story of war and death, loss and grief, all to the full orchestral strains of one of their own famous composers. The watchers were made to feel the horrors of the several times in history that Russia had been invaded, before the interpretation finally moved on to modern peace and renewal, democracy and cooperation, and the frolicking of little children.

And when the quarter-hour performance had ended, all of those who had

watched felt they now knew more about Russian history than they had ever learned in school.

Liberty walked up to the fourteen-year-old girl who awaited her. They began exchanging words in Russian, and completely forgot about their audience. Everyone watching was transfixed, as the gestures and chuckles and giggles of the two girls were so clear in their essential meaning that the people in the audience almost felt they could understand the words too.

Finally Liberty realized it was time to move on, so they exchanged letters, embraced for a moment, and the dancer ran to join her company.

"Her name is Svetlana," Liberty said to her audience, "and she has horses to care for at home, just like I do."

Many people chuckled.

"And finally, we come much closer to home, to the country that was very much the birthplace of international diplomacy. Please welcome the Paris Youth Academy of Dance!"



Unlike the other companies, they came out one at a time, about every ten seconds, each young but highly skilled dancer finding a different place on the large floor as a complex modern symphony began. And each performer continued to interpret the music separately from all the others. But somehow in their separateness there was a unity, a common theme created by all of them together, a thread that wove itself into the minds of the watchers.

Those in the audience saw the theme all at once, and they turned to each other to share or confirm what they had just discovered: the dance was about the youthful search for personal identity.

Then, as if in recognition that the theme had been understood, it changed, and the dancers paired up and were no longer alone, and they danced together to a different theme, which the watchers saw much more quickly: the youthful search for love and affection.

As soon as the audience had figured out that new theme, it changed again, and pairs came together to form groups of six or eight. At first the groups danced around each other peacefully, occasionally miming the exchange of unseen goods. But soon mimed fights broke out, and not long after all the groups were battling all the other groups. The tension was building, and the

audience couldn't imagine where the chaos could lead.

Then, hardly noticed, one dancer ran off the floor, returning a moment later carrying a huge mock-up of a bomb, bright red, with a long fuse dangling from its top. It was clearly made of paper, but he made it look very heavy with his dramatic labored steps. All of the dancers froze while he staggered to the center of the arena and set it down. Its meaning was clear to the audience.

Many of the dancers began to tremble, and others began to cry. But one in each group started running around, comforting those who were afraid, running from group to group, giving hugs and signs of encouragement. And then a little girl ran up to the bomb and tried to push it over, but she seemed to be unable to do it alone. More of the youngest dancers from different groups joined her, even as the older dancers were still trembling and crying.

Finally, with about half the company pushing on the bomb, it fell over. They didn't stop there, but kept pushing, sliding the mock-up across the floor and out the door through which it had entered.

The audience clapped and cheered, and a new song began, bright and cheerful and hopeful, and the entire company began to dance in complete unity and symmetry, at last showing off their greatest skills, and no one watching was unmoved.

They leapt and twirled, and when the joyful song ended, they bowed deeply and nearly everyone in the seats above stood as they clapped. Then, as they had come, they left one at a time, until only one boy about ten years old was left.

"J'espère que vous pourrez visiter mon pays un jour," he said, handing Liberty a small box.

"Thank you," Liberty said, bending down to his height. "And here is a gift for you, to remember me by until I can come and visit you."

He ran out of the arena, waving as he went, and Liberty straightened herself and looked at her audience.

"And now, from the United States of America... from the streets of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania... me!"



Liberty was perhaps not as technically proficient as the Russians, perhaps not as versatile as the Chinese, maybe not as mysterious as the dancers from

India, and definitely not as dramatic as the French. But the audience had a personal connection with her, knowing that she had played an essential part in the Treaty process. They welcomed her back with loud cheering and watched with rapt attention as she glided around the floor, swooping and twirling to a gentle, melodic piece that spoke of summertime warmth, sandy beaches, and blue waters rolling in. Alone, she seemed to fill the large arena almost as successfully as any one of the dance companies, and her moving interpretation took her to nearly every spot on the floor.

As the song ended, its tones became the sound of the wind and the soaring of birds' wings, and Liberty glided as gracefully as any feathered creature and alighted upon the last note, presenting herself in humble form for her audience.

And again they made their gratitude known, and flowers, singly or in bunches, came flying down onto the wooden floor.

She walked to the nearest one and picked it up, and the room fell silent. "Somebody up there knows how to touch a girl's heart!"

The room erupted in gentle laughter.

"But now I have to step aside, because the truth is I couldn't have accomplished anything alone. When I hysterically ran up to my friend Ashley, who was out pulling weeds, and told her someone was shooting at me, she could have shaken her head and figured I had gotten too much sun!"

A number of people snickered.

"But instead she believed me, and moments later she was almost killed saving my life. Now it wouldn't be very nice to drag just any friend out here and make them dance for you..."

The audience laughed.

"But my friend Ashley just happens to be the current United States women's gymnastics silver medallist and a member of the next Olympics team. Please welcome Sister Ashley Marie Riddle!"

They clapped and cheered loudly as Ashley walked out, realizing they were in for yet another treat. She wore a dramatic black and gold leotard that flashed as it caught the lights, a cluster of yellow flowers held her bright hair in a short ponytail, and makeup had been applied to her facial scars, making them all but invisible. The director of the French dance company swallowed

as he watched from one of the performers' alcoves.

Brother Glen activated Ashley's microphone.

"I am certainly honored to be here, Liberty. Actually, when I started that tumbling routine you were talking about, I didn't even have time to realize there was a glass wall right there..."

Everyone laughed, partly in humor, partly in sympathy.

"You know," she continued, "if your survival was essential to the Treaty because your father is Senator Buchanan, and my tumbling saved your life at that moment, the credit actually goes back even further. If it wasn't for one very talented team captain, I wouldn't know how to tumble like that. Please welcome the only American to bring home a medal from the Chunichi Cup in the last thirty-two years, Sister Karen Sundberg!"

The audience clapped as Tabitha pushed Karen's wheelchair out onto the floor.

"This is completely embarrassing!" Karen said as soon as she was with Liberty and Ashley.

The audience chuckled. They could see that Karen was smiling.

"As you can see," Ashley explained, "Karen has given more to the sport of gymnastics than I have. What happened to her could just as easily have happened to me. So as I perform for you, I also perform, now and always, in honor of Karen. And since I have not been back in training long enough to show you the really good stuff, my team leader Tabitha McDonald is joining me. We will be doing a dual floor exercise to the music of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart."

A hearty applause began, and the lights dimmed. When they came up again, the flowers on the floor had been collected, the mat had been unrolled, and Ashley and Tabitha were in their starting positions. The music began.

The song was bright and exciting, but at the same time simple and clean in its melody and rhythm. Ashley danced while Tabitha remained in her initial posture, and as always her motions were totally fluid and her transitions light and noiseless. Soon, Tabitha began a tumbling pass, and part way through it, Ashley froze in posture. Then Ashley danced again, and just as the music entered a complex bridge, she did some tumbling that seemed very basic to her, but was nonetheless impressive to the audience. But finally, as the

musical bridge resolved its tension and the final verse began, Tabitha showed them her most difficult specialties, her twisting aerials and triple somersaults, and then both gymnasts completed the performance by dancing together to the song's ending.

The audience cheered with appreciation, and Ashley and Tabitha bowed deeply. More flowers flew down onto the mat, and the two girls ran around picking up as many as they could.

The lights dimmed again, and Liberty spoke from the darkness. "I have, of course, saved the best for last. When a person gets caught up in events like those that led to the passage of the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty, it becomes easy to start believing in divine intervention. The other person who risked her life to save mine did so with her eyes wide open in a situation that would have sent me screaming back to my mommy for protection. And she did it at nine years of age."

A murmur ran through the audience.

"She carries burdens that would crush most of us, and she does it while literally dancing on her toes, as she is, among other things, an advanced ballet dancer. She asked me if she could lead the grand finale, and a request from her is like a whispered plea from an angel: you don't say *no* without a very good reason. Please welcome Sister Sarah Rhiannon Skelly!"

The watchers clapped, but were soon silenced as a small spotlight came on, illuminating a lone dancer poised as if peering up at a star-studded sky, wearing a ballet costume that suggested both divine angels and earthly fairies. Music began to play, off on the edge of hearing, like a rumor of bells and flutes, or just an echo of far away pipes and harps. She started dancing lightly and silently, and seemed not to touch the floor. The spotlight following her, the rest of the arena remaining dark. The audience was caught in her spell.

The music took up new themes, now with strings and the sweet voices of a treble choir, now with deep drums and clarion horns, and she danced with all her heart and she showed them how free from the cares of the world a fairy could be, how unhindered an angel could fly.

Nearly every face in the audience wore a smile, and they could have watched her all night, but she had other plans. She glided to one entrance and beckoned, and the Russian dancers entered on their toes. She pranced to

another curtain, and the colorful young dancers from India poured into the arena. At yet another the French youth flowed onto the floor in dancing pairs, and at a fourth curtain, the Chinese strode in, arms swinging as if ready to fly.

Each dance company began to form a large circle as the music became more rhythmic, and the circles overlapped and they threaded past each other carefully, flawlessly, even though each company was dancing a completely different style. And amongst it all Sarah went this way and that, dancing in one of the spaces for a moment, then darting through the lines of dancers to another space.

Then Ashley and Tabitha began doing cartwheels and round-offs and other simple skills around the outside of the entire formation, and Liberty danced her way into the space at the very middle of the arena. The resulting complexity was mind-boggling, and the watchers thought they were looking into a rapidly turning kaleidoscope.

Finally the music came to a brilliant ending, and all the dancers leapt into the air and landed together, and then bowed as the audience jumped to its feet, clapping and whistling. And the cheering and clapping went on for what seemed like several long minutes.



But at long last everyone relaxed, and the dancers gathered around the edge of the floor, all save Liberty, who stood in the middle. She spoke once more.

“Thank you. When someone suggested that this celebration end with a prayer, I had to claim ignorance...” A number of people in the audience chuckled. “I sought out a friend, and my friend is someone who knows about such things far better than I do. He is also someone who is always there when I need him, and it would have been simply impossible for me to take my message to the other countries of the world without his love and support.” She reached out a welcoming hand toward the passage where he was supposed to be waiting.

For a moment Shawn felt somewhat like he had at the arena in Birmingham... steeled for a confrontation. Then he reminded himself that it was his friend Liberty out there, his friend and first lover Liberty. He could do this for her, because of what she had given him, what she had risked with him.

He took a deep breath and walked out to join her.

They stood side by side and Liberty bowed her head. Shawn had been preparing for this moment for two weeks. He had not been asked to lead a prayer from his own religion, or for that matter from any other religion. He had been asked to do something he had never done before. It had taken plenty of consultation with Sister Lydia, Sister Maria, and several others.

Slowly he spread his arms, and then his soft voice filled the otherwise silent arena. “May the courage that has been shown by leaders and their helpers... all over the world in these recent days and years... remain forever in our minds as models of goodness. May the music we have heard... and the dances we have seen tonight... remain forever in our hearts as models of beauty. May we walk in peace together into the future... as we search for paths of truth that will guide our feet well. Good night... and good journey to you all.”

Liberty opened her eyes and waved to the audience, and Ashley, Tabitha and Sarah ran out and waved also. Shawn self-consciously added his gestures to theirs. A few more bunches of flowers came from the departing audience, and Sarah ran about waving at the people above. The general audience was filtering out the exit doors into the warm New York night, but the V.I.P. guests knew they were invited to meet the dancers, and most of them were eager.

As Liberty and Shawn were waving for about the last time, preparing to turn toward the reception, Liberty spoke softly so that only her religious friend could hear. “Do you know that your prayer was just seen and heard by more people than have *ever* seen your dad preach on T.V.?”

Shawn was very thoughtful — and more than a little amazed — for the rest of the evening.



While the dancers had been dancing and the audience had watched enchanted, others had been setting up tables full of tasty foods and beverages, putting up decorations, and posting security guards in the large practice room just outside the arena. When the performance was over, everything was ready.

Ashley ran across the floor and met the three people she had invited as they were coming down the steps from the seats above. They were moving

slowly, as if unsure they should be going to the reception.

“Hi Mom! Hi Dad! There are some wonderful people here I want to introduce you to!”

“But Honey, we don’t want to impose on all these important people,” her mother said in a hushed voice.

“You’re here by special invitation, just like they are. And you’re just as important to me as any ambassador or diplomat. Come on! There are lots of goodies waiting for us.”

Then, as she coaxed her parents across the dance floor toward the passage to the practice room, she fell in beside her third guest.

“Cheryl, I’m really glad you could come! Did you like it?”

“It was fantastic! I bet it was hard for you to hold yourself back and not try your elite skills.”

“*Really* hard, but my coach made me promise. Having Tabitha there to do them made it okay.”

“She’s good!”

“Yeah. Can you come back to Lyceum with me?”

“Yep! For up to two weeks! Do I get to fly in an airliner again? Today was my first time.”

“Of course! We’re flying back tomorrow afternoon.”

They passed through the performers’ entrance tunnel, the curtains of which were open, and a pair of Lyceum security people observed them.

“Mom, Dad, this is Sister Hillary, and this is Brother LeRoy. And this is Cheryl Adams, who’s on the Olympics team with me.”

“Glad to meet you folks.”

They walked down a short corridor and entered the reception room where more than a hundred people were beginning to mill about and shake hands, sip juices and wines, and taste carefully prepared canapés while they discussed international politics and the beauty and skill of the dancers they had seen that evening. Most of the dancers had not yet entered the room.

“Over here!” Ashley said, pulling them along. “Ambassador Dubois, these are my parents, and this is my friend Cheryl Adams, another world-class gymnast.”

The French ambassador to the United Nations greeted them graciously,

and Cheryl blushed when he kissed her hand. They exchanged pleasantries and compliments about Ashley, and then said good-bye.

“And this is Secretary General Eskildsen.”

“I am so honored to meet you folks! Ashley is rapidly becoming known to the diplomatic community, and she is always welcome at the United Nations. Is this a fellow future diplomat?” he asked, turning to greet Cheryl.

“I’m just a gymnast on the Olympic team, but I get to stay with Ashley for two weeks at Lyceum!”

“Well, well, being on an Olympic team makes you a bit of a diplomat already. And I’ve heard that wonderful things can happen when bright young people visit Lyceum!”

Both girls smiled.

Ashley introduced her guests to several people on the U.N. diplomatic staff, two more ambassadors, the Vice President of the United States, Brother Timoteo, and the director of the French dance company. He was especially cordial. They also renewed their acquaintance with Senator Buchanan, who reiterated that he would cover any and all surgery expenses.

Finally, Ashley said good-bye to her parents, as they had to get to the airport for a late flight home. They were very proud of their adopted daughter, and still a little in awe of her ability to invite them and have all their transportation and other expenses covered.

Ashley and Cheryl, along with Liberty and the other Lyceum members who were in New York, mingled and talked with the remaining reception guests until they had all taken leave of their hosts and returned to their homes or embassies. Then everyone pitched in, and Cheryl was amazed to see how quickly the entire arena was cleaned up.



It was after midnight when Ashley and her new friend arrived back at the large apartment. Ashley managed to find a place where they could put their sleeping bags side by side, and after saying good night to many people, they crawled in, yawning uncontrollably.

The last thing Ashley remembered was looking down the hall into the living room, and seeing Liberty and Jason sitting on one of the couches holding hands, and near them Sarah was sitting on the floor while Shawn sat

in a chair behind her running a comb through her hair. Ashley smiled, and then fell into a deep, restful sleep.



Chapter 18: Life Goes On

The sun and the clouds played cat and mouse with each other for the rest of August in the Pacific Northwest, and life at Lyceum settled down a little bit, at least relative to the dramatic events that had surrounded the enactment of the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty.

Cheryl Adams, the elite gymnast from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, stayed with Ashley right up until two days before she had to be back in school. They began a solid friendship, even though Ashley had to excuse herself for a couple of days to interpret for some visiting French business people at an international trade show. Cheryl was amazed by that assignment and Ashley's many other responsibilities.

That friendship with Cheryl helped Ashley to put even more distance between herself and the painful memory of losing Tim. She took the risk of telling Cheryl about Tim, and was surprised to discover that Cheryl had also loved and lost already. That common experience deepened their bond, and Cheryl boarded the train for home with many things to think about, things that just might someday fit into her plans for the future.

After hosting *Dances for a Nuclear-Safe Planet* in New York City, Liberty was rarely seen except when she was dashing to a class or running to a work shift. The rotary-wing flight simulator, however, knew her well. And during the last half of August, a date with Jason consisted of Liberty with her nose in an aviation book while Jason massaged her neck and shoulders. He didn't complain — he wanted to take that phase of their relationship very slowly and

carefully.

Shawn began the Chemistry class, and felt he was really getting close to the branch of science he would like to pursue in depth. He also began to spend considerable time reflecting on the will of God as he was experiencing it unfolding in his life. He seemed to be face to face with some deep-seated assumptions, some powerful taboos that were keeping him from doing what needed to be done. And what needed to be done was becoming more and more obvious, both to others... and to himself.



The F.A.A. examiner, a large and stern lady, arrived at eight in the morning on September 5th, and was pleasantly surprised to be treated to a hearty breakfast with Sisters Erica and Liberty. But she made it clear that hospitality would not cause her to be any less meticulous in her scoring of either the written or performance tests.

“Good!” Liberty said, feeling indignant at the implication. “Lyceum has a reputation for top-notch pilots and beautiful helicopters, and they certainly don’t want *me* ruining that image.”

Sister Erica nodded slowly with a smirk on her face.

“But you’ll have to understand...” Liberty continued, “hospitality is just what we do here. The Sheriff is over there having breakfast right now, and at that table with Sister Shannon Eileen is a homeless family we’re helping. And tonight we’re putting on a party for some visiting European royalty, where I’ll be helping to serve.”

The examiner seemed convinced they weren’t trying to bribe her, and ordered another cup of coffee. Liberty was determined to show her the best flying she had ever seen in a student pilot.

At nine o’clock Liberty and the examiner entered a small conference room that had been reserved for the occasion.

“Mmm... not bad,” the husky lady said. “Sometimes I have to give these tests in the corner of an aircraft hanger!”

Liberty smiled with pride.

The examiner began to speak rapidly, obviously knowing the lines by heart. “Okay. Down to business. You have one hour to complete as much of the first test booklet as you can. Do not be upset that you cannot complete all

the questions — it was designed that way. You may use pencil, paper, and this calculator, which has only basic arithmetic functions. You may not use any references, notes, or other computing devices. Do you understand and agree to these rules?”

“I wouldn’t make much of a helicopter pilot if I couldn’t handle *that* much!”

The examiner cracked a slight smile. “True. But you’d be surprised at some of the people I get. Ready?”

Liberty took a moment to make sure the calculator was working. *This clunker must be out of a museum!* “Ready.”

“You may begin.”

For the next hour, Liberty worked on the problems in the test booklet, her eyes rarely straying anywhere but to the calculator to check the arithmetic she had already done, or at least closely estimated, in her head. The examiner brought out a small portable computer to work on some project of her own, but kept an eagle eye on Liberty. When the hour was over, she interrupted.

“Time is up — put your pencil down.”

Liberty complied, thinking of saying something, but holding her tongue instead.

“How much were you able to complete?”

She asked! “Oh, I finished the questions about ten minutes ago. I’ve just been double-checking my answers.”

“Um... I see.”

After a short break, the second test booklet was placed in front of Liberty. It was similar to the first, except that no calculator was allowed. Liberty wasn’t bothered. But this time she finished only five minutes before the end of the allotted time.

During the third hour, no scratch paper was allowed, nor any figuring in the test booklet itself. Liberty took a deep breath and began. She had to ask for clarification about halfway through.

“On question ninety-three, can I assume I have plenty of fuel?”

“On *all* of the emergency procedures questions, you can assume that all systems are working normally, except those that are specified as malfunctioning. Since it is normal to have a twenty-five percent fuel reserve

over flight-plan requirements, you can assume that much fuel, unless a different fuel level is specified. The one exception to this general rule is that you may not assume you have a co-pilot who can perform any actions for you.”

“I understand,” Liberty said, and went back to work.

At exactly noon, she laid her pencil down for the last time, having answered all the questions and re-checked most of them.

“I enjoyed breakfast, but I will not be able to eat lunch with you, as I have to be checking your test booklets while I eat. I will know by one o’clock if you have qualified for the performance test.”

You can bet your sweet life I’ve qualified! “Shall I meet you in the office at one?”

“Please.”

“Oh, yes...” Liberty said, digging in her pocket. “Here’s a lunch coupon. You can use it in the cafeteria or at the barbecue in the Plaza.”

A slightly shocked look appeared on the examiner’s face. She was used to very business-like attitudes at that point in the process. Liberty could tell she was at a loss for words, so she slipped out the door, knowing the next hour would be difficult for both of them.



During lunch Liberty ate and drank and talked, letting the late summer sunshine warm her while Jason listened, massaged her tight neck muscles, and coaxed her to keep eating. She had less than an hour to unwind from three hours of tests, and get ready for a three-hour performance exam... *if* she had done well enough on the written tests.

The F.A.A. examiner exchanged her coupon for a club sandwich, potato salad, and iced tea, and found a quiet table where she had some room to work. After consuming a quarter of the sandwich, she used a hand scanner to enter Liberty’s test booklets into her computer, and then selected the scoring function.



Liberty was perched on a work table in the office, swinging her legs nonchalantly, when the examiner entered.

“If I hadn’t proctored your written tests myself, Miss Buchanan, I would

suspect you of cheating. But luckily for you, there is no method of cheating that I don't know how to catch." A smile crept onto her face. "You have qualified for the performance tests... admirably."

Liberty held in a grin. "Would you like to use a Bell 6000-C or a Boeing V-800?"

"My God! This is your first ticket. Didn't you train in anything smaller?"

"Well, we had an M-500, but it's in Atlanta now."

"Even *that's* large as training birds go. Are you sure you're comfortable in those big machines?"

"Sure am!"

"And you have the permission of the owners to *use* one of them?" the examiner asked, her tone verging on incredulous.

"Liberty can use whichever bird she, and you, prefer," Sister Erica said in a calm voice as she entered the room. "There are no scheduled flights until this evening. Sorry we don't have anything smaller. We have a Bell 5000-A on order, but that's still bigger than the V-800."

"Well... I must say it'll be a pleasure to fly in something other than the open two-seaters I usually get," the examiner said.

"The V-800 is in Port Two as I remember," Liberty said. "Will you control for us, Erica?"

"I sure will, Lib. This is a happy — and tense — day for the teacher as well as the student."

As they walked toward the Heliport, the examiner explained the rules. "It is your responsibility, Miss Buchanan, to demonstrate to me your knowledge of standard operating procedures for rotorcraft category, helicopter class, private certificate, visual flight rules. The best way to accomplish that is to narrate all of your actions and decisions out loud. However, I am not available as a resource of any kind, except in a genuine emergency. If you ask me any question or request that I perform any operation for you, I will simply respond by asking if you want me to take over the craft. If, for any reason, I feel that your piloting is sub-standard or unsafe, I will inform you that I am taking over the craft, and you must surrender the controls to me immediately. Do you agree to these conditions?"

"Of course." *Have you ever flown anything bigger than a two-seater?*

“Good.”

They passed through the Heliport waiting area, empty and quiet at that moment, and Sister Erica unlocked one of the double doors that led out onto the appropriate landing pad. The dome roof was closed, and the medium-size eight passenger helicopter sat still, gleaming slightly in the dim light that emanated from indirect lamps over each exit door.

“Are you *sure* you can handle a helicopter of that size, young lady?”

Liberty grinned. *In my sleep!*

“I’ll leave you two here,” Sister Erica said. “I’ll have the lights on in just a moment.”

Liberty’s teacher left the pad through a small door, climbed up to the control room, and touched the controls for the interior pad lights. Then she sat back and watched, knowing she had done everything she could to prepare Liberty for this day, and now she could do no more, except be on hand to congratulate a very happy young pilot... or comfort a very disappointed teenager... when the exams were over.

Erica could see Liberty as she began her pre-flight mechanical checks. Touching another control, she could hear everything that was said on the landing pad below.

“...I am now beginning the diagnostic sequence for the main flight control computer. In this process, all of the pilot’s controls are tested and calibrated. It takes about fifteen seconds... there. All my indicators are green. Now I’m going up to the rotor inspection hatch to check the linkages and run a diagnostic...”

The examiner was silent, simply following Liberty around, not getting in her way, but making marks on her clipboard periodically.

After about ten minutes, Liberty and the examiner entered the helicopter and strapped themselves into the pilot and co-pilot’s seats. More time passed, and Erica smiled, realizing Liberty was in some danger of boring the examiner to death by checking and explaining every control and subsystem in the craft.

“Ranger K375 to Port Two Control,” Liberty’s voice said.

“This is Port Two Control. Go ahead K375.”

“Requesting dome open and clearance for engine start.”

“Your dome is opening now, and you are cleared for engine start.”

The twin jet engines started smoothly, and had a good, long warm-up time as Liberty checked everything and narrated her every thought to the examiner. Sister Erica had a hunch that Liberty was enjoying herself immensely.

“Ranger K375 requesting clearance for rotor start.”

“You have clearance for rotor start, K375.”

The helicopter’s eighty foot rotor did not start immediately, and Sister Erica was glad, as Liberty had the responsibility to make sure the area around her craft was clear and safe. Eventually the blade began to move, slowly at first, then faster and faster.

“You have flight clearance whenever you are ready, K375.”

“Thank you, Port Two Control. Estimated flight duration, one and a half hours.”

The rotor spun faster until it was nearly a blur. The large helicopter began to lift from the pad, at first slowly and hesitantly, then more assertively. It rose straight up, slowly and carefully, until it was well clear of the port building. Finally, at an altitude of about a hundred feet, it began to move off westward, over the wide Willamette Valley where Liberty had plenty of room to prove her skills.



Jason watched from the Petting Zoo as Liberty lowered the flying machine carefully back into the port building. He waved to the member on-duty, who was supervising some giant tortoise rides, and then headed toward the main building complex. He knew Liberty would still have to go through her shut-down and de-fueling procedures with the examiner, but he wanted to be on hand as soon as she was free.

After detouring to his room for the visual aids he wanted to use, he wandered slowly toward the Main Lobby, and arrived just as Liberty was shaking the examiner’s hand at the front door. The husky lady seemed to be in a good mood, but was saying something about having a dinner engagement elsewhere. Then she turned, slung her computer case over her shoulder, and headed across the Plaza.

Jason stepped beside Liberty, who was still watching the F.A.A. examiner depart.

“Was she nice?”

“She loosened up about ten minutes into the flight, but then I think she peed her pants when I did a complete engine shutdown at five thousand feet, auto-rotated for three thousand, and then did a cold restart.”

“Um... I think I can relate to her response!”

Liberty grinned at her lover.

“So... do you know if you passed?” he asked.

“Nine hundred and ninety-three points!”

“What’s passing?”

“Nine fifty.”

“Whoopee!” He took her in his arms, and she held him just as tightly as they spun around several times.

“I get my license in about a week!”

“You’ve also earned something else... if you can get away for a couple of weeks in October.”

“What?”

He pulled the brochure out of his pocket.

The cover told her everything she needed to know, but she feasted her eyes on the maps and pictures inside anyway, a big smile frozen on her face.

“Jason! The Amasia Express! You mean... you and me? All the way from Calgary to Moscow?”

He nodded, a smile also on his face. “And then we can spend some time in the Moscow planning office and fly home from there.”

“I want to pay for part of it!” she said assertively.

“I’ve already got the tickets covered. But I must admit it took nearly every penny I had. You can help with meals and souvenirs and stuff like that.”

“No problem! Oh, Jason, thank you so much! I’ll get to practice my Russian, and I’ll get my first clearance soon, and...” She stopped and looked into his eyes. “And it will give us lots of time to talk about the future, and time for me to show you that I’ve learned my lesson.”

He kissed her on the cheek.

“I’ve learned a lot too... about loving... and about forgiving.”

“Do you think you could love a helicopter pilot who also bakes cakes?”

“If you could love a veterinarian who also plays basketball!”

They smiled, kissed, and walked hand in hand toward the Dining Hall, where they would soon both be helping to serve the fine cuisine, fit for visiting royalty, that was being prepared at that very moment.



The following week was ushered in by an unusually fierce rain and wind storm, but by Tuesday the sun had come back out, just in time for the annual conference of the Association of Industrial Chemists, and the air was clear and fresh. Shawn was planning to attend several of the conference sessions that were open to the public. But on the first day of the conference, the sessions were for Association members only, and the entire Dining Hall had been arranged to handle the nine hundred conference attendees.

Shawn and Sarah spotted each other as they both entered the Residential Lobby to grab a bite to eat. They exchanged smiles and got in line together at the tables that were laden with all manner of sandwich makings.

"Yum! I love egg salad!" Sarah said.

"I'm going to try this roast beef," Shawn said. "Looks good!"

"Want to eat lunch in the Picnic Area? There's hardly anyone out there," she said. "Everyone thought the storm was going to go on for days."

"Okay," Shawn said, delighting in the warm feelings he always had when spending time with his younger friend, and simultaneously sensing the fear lurking inside himself that always arose when he pondered the implications of those warm feelings.

As they carried their plates out into the sunshine, Sarah slowed and then stood still, gazing up at the sky. For a moment Shawn was tempted to ask what she was looking at, but then realized that he knew. Small clouds were flitting across the blue sky, changing their shapes as they went, and Shawn saw them with new eyes, and gazed at them transfixed, and almost imagined that he was actually seeing them as Sarah saw them, through her eyes and her mind.

Suddenly he was struck by a formidable thought, realizing the massive amounts of courage it must take to hold her head up tall, in public and private, even in performances, day after day, knowing that most people who looked at her were only thinking one thing: *Why is her face and neck so pink on one side?*

A wave of sadness filled him, and he felt like crying, but he held it in. He didn't want her to think he was crying about her misfortune. And he realized that he hadn't even thought about her obvious scar tissue in months. It had just become, for him, part of who she was. There were so many wonderful qualities that he admired in her... including her overall beauty... that the one defect others tended to see first no longer bothered him at all.

She turned and looked at him with her clear deep blue eyes, and they smiled at each other. Then they walked on toward their destination.

There was a family with small children and an elderly couple in the Picnic Area. Shawn and Sarah looked around, and both found themselves considering a large fallen log on the far side of the playground. They had both used it previously as a place to read a book or sit with a friend, but had never before sat there together. They agreed silently and walked to it, holding each other's plates as they climbed up one at a time.

"Yumm! The roast beef is awesome!" Shawn said after sinking his teeth into his sandwich.

"Bite for a bite?"

"Sure."

They swapped plates for a minute.

Shawn was silent for awhile as he savored his sandwich and gathered his courage.

"I have a problem..." Shawn said, finally broaching what was on his mind.

"What kind?"

He appreciated her direct question. It made it easier to go on. "A problem figuring out what God wants me to do. So I've been praying a lot recently."

"I've seen you. I've been doing a little too, but I'm not very good at it yet. What do you *think* He wants you to do?"

"Well... there are things I already *know* He wants me to do, like learn about science. And there are things He *might* want me to do someday, but I'm not ready for them yet. And then there are things I haven't even *imagined* yet."

Sarah giggled.

"But He keeps giving me signs that there is something else I have to do, something I've already started doing a little bit, but not with my whole heart

yet. I'm sure now... He wants me to do it with my whole heart. He wants me to be a... sort of a... companion to someone."

"Is that like a work assignment?"

Shawn smiled to himself, thinking for a moment that her question revealed her youthful naïveté. Then he stopped himself, realizing that she was looking down at her plate, fidgeting with her celery sticks, as if she didn't want him to see her face at that moment. Suddenly he understood the question behind her question.

"If it were just a work assignment, it wouldn't scare me so much. But I think God wants me to be the person's companion for a long, long time, maybe for the rest of my life. And the more I think about it and pray about it, the more I think I want the same thing. And that's what really gets me scared."

She looked up at him, and her eyes held both the joys of childhood and the weighty concerns of being grown up.

"And I don't know what to do," Shawn went on, "because what God wants me to do seems so... impossible."

"I thought you said nothing was impossible when God wanted it to happen...?" she said in a tone that was both statement and question.

Shawn was silent for a long time. It was his turn to stare at his plate and poke at his olives, making them roll back and forth. "You're right," he whispered. "Now I know what a martyr feels like. God's will is so important, but carrying it out can be so scary... so dangerous... so... seemingly impossible. I just don't know what to do."

"What does God want you to do that's so scary, Shawn?" she asked.

But before Shawn could even think about answering, he saw that tears were on her face. She already knew what he had been avoiding with his vague words. And he realized that his continued fear and doubt was hurting her. He had to say clearly what was on his mind, and decide once and for all if he was going to be that companion or not, or else he was nothing but the biggest coward in the world. He wanted to cry, and he wanted to run. *Please guide me, Father. Please strengthen me!* But more than anything else, he wanted to do the right thing.

"I think..." he began in a shaky voice, "...God wants me to be *your*

companion, Sarah. And *I* want to be your companion too. But it seems so... impossible... and I just don't know what to do..."

She smiled at him, the sweetest, warmest smile he had ever seen. And that smile made most of the fear melt away, most of the doubt evaporate, most of the impossibility change into possibility.

"Maybe... the first thing you could do... if you want to... is hold my hand?" she said in a tentative voice.

Shawn looked into his younger friend's sparkling, wet eyes. A fearful place somewhere inside him melted. He felt courage pump through his veins almost as tangibly as blood. A smile grew on his face, and he felt sure he was doing what God wanted him to do, just as surely as when he had left home, and just as surely as when he had confronted his father in Birmingham. He reached out and took Sarah's hand in his, and squeezed it warmly and firmly.

Neither one spoke for a long time. Both of them, each in their own way, pondered the significance of what they were doing. It wasn't as if they hadn't touched before, as friends or fellow Lyceum members. But this touch held meanings that were new to both of them, meanings that spoke of closeness and intimacy on many levels, meanings that were potentially very long lasting.

"I know some of the reasons you were scared," Sarah said in a soft voice. "Rachael and I talked about it, and she told me how some people would think it was bad just because you're older than me. She said that if we became close, we'd have to be careful in public, especially for the next two or three years."

"That's okay with me. I know God wants us to take it slowly, and only do things together we're both ready for."

"Thanks!" she said, smiling and squeezing his hand. "I've always felt safe with you, Shawn, and I know you'd never hurt me. But please don't think I'm just a little child simply because I'm not as tall and pretty as Liberty."

A moment of sadness and guilt came over him. He looked down at his plate. But he already knew Sarah didn't hate him for what had happened with Liberty on the trip. She was trying, he realized, to express a different concern, and he thought he understood what it was. He took a deep breath and put away his guilt feelings. She needed to hear some reassurances.

"To me you're just as pretty as Liberty, and sometimes I think you're more grown up than I am. Even though you're still a little short, I haven't thought

of you as a child for a long time, and everyone can tell you'll be tall in just a few years."

Sarah smiled with both pride and embarrassment. She had made a number of changes in her life since her tenth birthday, but one of the changes she wanted to make required the cooperation of another. Now he was there, holding her hand, and even though she wanted their relationship to unfold very slowly and carefully, at the same time she was excited about the wonderful new things she was going to discover side by side with her special new friend and companion.

Shawn said a silent prayer of thanks for the courage he had found and the companion he had gained, a companion he felt sure was going to be there for a long, long time.



The middle of September passed, and the weather turned rainy. Ashley was just finishing a long day of Childcare, Depth History, and Gardening classes, three solid hours in the gym, an hour of coaching, all followed by French and Interpretive Dance. It was nearly nine o'clock, and she was wandering back from the Recreation Center slowly, with no particular plans for the evening, as all her friends seemed to be busy elsewhere.

She stepped into the Main Lobby, the strap of her gym bag over her shoulder, and looked around. One fireplace was going, and about twenty people were talking or just relaxing. Some acoustical guitar music was playing. She crossed the Lobby, smiling at a very small girl who was sitting proudly in one of the large lounge chairs.

Sister Jennifer, the only person from Ashley's first evaluation week to so far become a resident member, was at the Information and Assistance desk. They waved to each other, and Ashley's mind went back more than a year and a half to that time. She had understood little about Lyceum then, her main quest having been to find a gym where she could train at elite levels. Thinking about it now, it still seemed amazing to her that they had let her come back a second time. But she knew she had very much to learn about people, and she herself certainly claimed no insight into who might, someday, make a good Lyceum member, and who might not. She entered the large back office.

It was softly lit, and very quiet, as only three members were at work.

Brother Paul was at the telecommunications desk, Sister Marscha was putting together a booklet of some kind at a work table, and one of the very old brothers, whose name Ashley didn't remember, was doing something very slowly at a computer using just one finger, occasionally two.

A call came in, and Ashley stood still and just listened to Brother Paul, knowing that call could have been from her two years before, or it might be from someone who would be her friend someday...

"Hello, this is Brother Paul at Lyceum. How may I be of service?... A private group facility for Samhain? Yes, we have several things you might find to your liking..." He began to access information at a computer screen. "I see... yes... thirteen with sleeping facilities?... okay... I have a small Retreat Center available for that evening... Completely private, including the surrounding five acres... Yes, a very nice campfire circle and all the firewood you need... I'd be happy to send you a brochure, and I can tentatively reserve the facility for you now..."

Ashley smiled, and wondered if she would get to meet them. Maybe they would come up to the Dining Hall for their meals. But except for Brother Paul taking some information, the call was over, so she wandered toward her favorite computer terminal, which was at a little desk by the large windows on the far side of the office.

After entering her private password, she looked over the options. She didn't feel like writing in her journal, and she was already well aware of upcoming events. News and world affairs didn't catch her eye, and she didn't have any new mail to read. Finally she selected her long-range calendar.

The most distant event on it was the Olympics the following summer. She smiled, remembering how she had once not even dared to imagine such a lofty goal. Now preparation for that event was the most important thing in her life, taking up fifteen hours a week, more like twenty-five if she counted her coaching, her dance classes, and the extra time she usually spent in the gym on weekends. And she knew those hours would increase dramatically as the Olympics approached.

Then she noticed the week she would be spending in Los Angeles in October as part of an interpreting team at an international environmental conference, the weekend of the Pan-American Gymnastics Cup in Rio de

Janeiro in November, and the week long training she was going to at the U.N. in early December. In January she had a one-day gymnastics exhibition, and was part of a team going to France to help with the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty implementation process. And in February she had been invited to the International Historical Society conference in London. She planned to pay for her air fare by giving some gymnastics clinics while she was there, and she knew she could stay at the Lyceum mission support office.

Then in March she had a two-week vacation to visit her parents and friends in South Dakota, and as soon as she got back, her preparations for the Olympics would go into high gear. It looked like an exciting year, and she knew many more things would happen that she could not yet foresee.

Feeling finished with her calendar, she switched to the educational section of her computer files. The first page told her that she had thirty-two quarter credits toward college. At the rate she was going, she realized, she would graduate college about the same time most people her age graduated high school. A smile of pride covered her face. But none of it was any good, she remembered Brother Howard saying, unless it was put to good service.

She switched to her current class schedule. A change or two needed to be made. French 3 was taking up more time than it deserved. She requested the class list, highlighted *French 4*, and requested the class description.

French 4: a refresher for those with a very high level of fluency, concentrating on technical and diplomatic terminology, rare grammar forms, and unusual idioms. One hour per week. One credit. Sister Viviane.

It would be nice to learn from Dr. Guise again, who had just returned from a residency at the planning office in Basel. Ashley removed French 3 from her schedule and added French 4. Now it was time for the big decision...

She scanned the list of available languages. There were many, as someone at Lyceum spoke every major language in the world. Suddenly her mind went back to her first visit to the General Assembly Hall at the United Nations, and she remembered Sister Heather recommending she consider an oriental language at some point. She also knew from her history classes that more people spoke some kind of Chinese than any other language, and that China was rapidly becoming one of the most powerful nations in the world. She found *Mandarin Chinese* on the list, and requested more information.

For the next ten minutes, she looked at samples of the writing, listened to several speeches and dialogs in the language, reviewed the geography and politics of the region where the language was spoken, and looked over the class description. It felt right. She added Mandarin 1 to her schedule and grinned.

Then another part of her schedule caught her eye and she looked askance at the four hours of dance classes she had every week in the evenings. That felt like too many... and maybe she would cut back... after the Olympics. But right now they would have to stay. She didn't want to weaken her training routine just when she finally had a chance at truly world-class gymnastics.

Finally she looked at her history classes. She knew she wanted to add the new History of War and Peace class that Brother Timoteo was going to teach, and she knew she still had plenty to learn in Depth History, but it felt like the right time to let go of General History. She removed it from her schedule and added Brother Timoteo's class. That seemed like the right thing to do.

Then Ashley turned to her credentials page, pulled her legs up onto her chair, and gazed at the screen. There was her French fluency, her Special Olympics leadership, the Flight Attendant certificate she had recently completed, and her Level Two Diplomatic Clearance. But most of her accomplishments were, of course, in gymnastics. Her mind wandered, first to the routines she was working on for the Olympics, then to the two new gymnasts who had just been offered membership, one of them fourteen and the other twenty. She wondered what they would be like.

She remembered something Tabitha had told her just a few days before, that a fifteen-year-old boy had been accepted who did some gymnastics. For a moment, Ashley let her mind run freely, imagining a cute boy who was good on the rings and the pommel horse and might be interested in a relationship.

But she stopped herself. There were still scars on her face. She could put make-up on them for a public performance now and then, but she couldn't hide them from her fellow Lyceum members. Boy-hunting would have to wait... until she had the plastic surgery done... and that had to wait until after the Olympics. She sighed, but knew it would all work out okay someday.

At last she felt like she could do no more at the computer terminal, so she pressed the log-off key, grabbed her gym bag, and headed out of the office.

When she got to the Main Lobby, she felt restless, not ready to head for her residence hall yet. She walked out onto the Main Plaza, empty at that hour save for a pair of umbrellas emerging from the South American Garden and turning toward the Welcome Center. The Plaza was, as always, pleasantly lit and inviting, even when the weather was wet.

Even though hundreds, sometimes thousands of people visited Lyceum every day, Ashley knew it was her home, and she was pretty sure she wanted it to remain her home for a long time to come. Her friend Karen had recently been faced with the decision to stay at Lyceum or to return to Maine, and to the amazement of her parents, had chosen to stay. Ashley understood.

A light mist was falling gently from the sky, and it felt tingly and refreshing as it cooled Ashley's face. It was a good time to be alive, she thought, with so many wonderful places in the world to see, so many curious languages to learn, and so much to discover about people and about life. And, she realized with a smile, so very, very much to be done.



Epilogue

After almost a year at Lyceum, Marty Jelwen had made considerable progress in his social growth, and his parents decided he was ready to attend a private school in Los Angeles. Unfortunately, that school was unable to protect Marty from the same exploitative forces that had attempted to locate him at Lyceum. Marty disappeared, and could not be found by police, F.B.I. agents, or private investigators.

After three episodes of surgery and regular physical therapy, Karen Sundberg regained the ability to walk about two years after her accident. Although she remained the honorary team captain of the elite gymnasts at Lyceum for years, she was never again able to pursue the sport herself. She always treasured the medals and ribbons she had earned as a gymnast, and attended the meets and exhibitions of her former team mates whenever she could.



Liberty Rae Buchanan shared the Nobel Peace Prize with her father for the part she played in the enactment of the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty. In their acceptance speech, they listed many people who deserved as much or more credit than they did, and spoke eloquently of the heroism of Sisters Ashley and Sarah. They did not keep the plaque, but placed it in a special display case in the Main Reception Lobby of the United Nations, along with the names of many others etched in brass.

The two men who died at Lyceum while making an attempt on Liberty's

life were never identified. Their superiors were unable to figure out how their plan could have failed given the obviously-minimal security of the place. Neither was the cause of the plane crash in the Cascades ever attributed to anything but mechanical failure. The Chinese diplomats, however, became regular visitors to Lyceum, and they soon added another small shrine to the Asian Garden which was dedicated to their deceased pilot.

Within a year after passing her first pilot's exams, Liberty had acquired her rotary-wing Instrument Rating and Commercial Pilot's License, and was working on a fixed-wing ticket, just so she would know how.

She became highly fluent in Russian, and along with Jason, was among the hundred members who transferred to the Moscow campus as soon as it opened. At that time she had enough credits for a college degree, but had not yet decided what her major should be.

Liberty continued to take the death of Sister Nancy hard, and only reluctantly chose another mentor, with whom she did not succeed in developing a deep trust for many years.



Shawn Andrew Mitchell persevered in his scientific studies, soon adding Biochemistry to his curriculum. He completed a three month residency in Greece early the following year, during which he spent much of his free time reading old manuscripts in churches and monasteries. He was very proud to receive his first diplomatic clearance.

Shawn could not have realized it at the time, but his confrontation with his father marked the end of an era. For more than half a century, a certain branch of Christianity had been trying to undo the separation of church and state that existed in most modern nations. By the time of the mission to Birmingham, the momentum of that effort was fading. The Reverend Tommy Mitchell was one of the last leaders of that movement, and after his public confrontation with his son, his influence rapidly waned.

Sarah was often seen at Shawn's side, but they never gave anyone reason to criticize their relationship. They knew their love had a special purpose, and they soon asked for, and received, the blessing of Sarah's mother.



About two months after the passage of the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty,

Ashley received an envelope in the mail that contained a short note and half of a certain broken coin. In a private ceremony that no one else attended, she slipped the chain that held the other half of the coin over her head for the last time, added it to the envelope, and placed it with her other keep-sakes in a small wooden box.

For several weeks after receiving the envelope, she almost wished she had transferred to the Atlanta campus when it had first opened. That way she would have been closer to Tim, and she wouldn't have been there to go through the glass window. But then she remembered that if she hadn't been there, her friend Liberty might have been killed, and the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty might not have been ratified. After realizing the possible implications of that alternate course of events, a much wiser young Lyceum member was glad the future was not hers to see.

Ashley Marie Riddle did not win any medals at the Olympics the following year in Athens. Her routines were excellent and she happily placed well, but the European and Asian competition was, as always, very stiff. Soon after the games, Senator Buchanan made sure the best doctors were selected, and Ashley's plastic surgery was even more successful than she had thought possible.

Ashley finished her G.E.D. about when her friend Liberty moved to Moscow. She was sad to see their circle of friendship separated by distance, but they all vowed to keep in close touch.



During the year following the conference at Lyceum, Dr. Hasari Singh and Dr. Mari Tanaka considered seven more possible natural causes of the ultimaton path that were proposed by scientists and others from around the world. None of them came close to being a viable explanation of the data, which by then was even more complete and required little interpolation. They finished their collaborated article soon after, which was quickly published by one of the most prestigious scientific journals in existence. As soon as the article was in print, Hasari asked Mari to marry him, and she accepted.

The Nuclear Disarmament Treaty seemed to act as a catalyst. Within a year after its passage, several major nations were beginning to divert their foreign aid funds into the programs of the United Nations. A spirit of

cooperation was sweeping the planet, and even those who had adamantly opposed the Treaty were beginning to realize that maybe its implementation would not lead to the end of civilization after all.

Some people even speculated that maybe, just maybe, the human race was beginning to grow up.





About the Author

Born in the Mojave Desert, J. Z. Colby now lives and writes deep in a forest of the Pacific Northwest.

He has studied many subjects, formally and informally, including psychology, philosophy, education, and performing arts, but remains a generalist. His primary profession as a mental health therapist, specializing with families and young adults, gives him many stories of personal growth.

All his life, he has been drawn toward a broad understanding of human nature, especially those physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual situations in which our capacity to function seems to reach its limits. He finds fascinating those few individuals who can transcend the limits of our common human nature and the dictates of our cultures.